

## CONNECTING TO THE LARGER WORLD

Travel has a way of grounding us whether we discover new places or revisit old ones. Recently, I had reason to be driving on Interstate 95 heading toward a conference in downtown Philly. Just to the west of the city, the interstate narrows considerably at Chester: to four tight and narrow lanes that are bordered by a long string of story-and-a-half row houses, back-to-back-to-back with no space in-between, and these row houses hover against the interstate as if the road was carved right through all their front yards.

One buzzes by these dwellings and this urban enclave as hurriedly and safely as possible. It's nerve-wracking just to keep your eye on the road and your car in your lane. The place becomes an afterthought to most who pass by or who might say out loud, "Thank goodness I do not live here." But the place can also trigger something within us: curiosity about the place followed by questions. What is it like to wake every morning in front of one of the busiest and noisiest interstates in America? To look out your window and see nothing but asphalt and concrete: the narrow street in front of your home defined by a chain-link fence across the street that is the only barrier keeping you and, perhaps, your young son and daughter or sister and brother from I-95. What is it like to walk to school or the neighborhood market without trees or grass or plants or flowers—where a random dandelion or two or three in the sidewalk represents the wild world of nature?

When one considers such a place, what might be your view of the world? What would make you a part of the community? Are you a newcomer or transient, or is this your only home? Do you always want to live here, or is escape more to your liking?

My world-view is now influenced heavily by looking out every day on one of the most beautiful valleys in the world. I feel lucky and blessed to live where I do. But if I lived in one of those row houses in Chester and had just moved to the Shenandoah Valley, perhaps I would wonder, even worry, about my new life here: Where do I buy milk? There are cows over there! How do I get to school? What do I do for fun?

Yes, we are all connected, but how so? Travel makes us look anew at familiar and unfamiliar places. The places where we were raised and educated, where we have lived, worked, and visited, have influenced us in fundamental ways. How we put this knowledge about place and self to use makes life worth living. But there is always the big picture behind it all.

Within the last few weeks astrophysicists in Australia have identified the environmental conditions of the Universe only 180 million years after Creation, the Big Bang. They tell us the world was colder than their models had suggested: that the temperature hovered around minus 454 degrees Fahrenheit because of the influence of black holes, even as light from the earliest of stars was beginning to expand.

Imagine: We are now within 180 million years of knowing something about the beginning of Existence. What an evolutionary path since then! From Creation in deep space and the formation of light 14 billion years ago to the formation of our Sun 9 billion years ago, from the streets of Chester to the views of the Shenandoah Valley: Behind such fathomless depths of space, place, and time lie secrets to our very being.

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