

THE ON — ING SERIES

On Lasting

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Dedicated to all the scientists of the world who always cared about finding the answer to help people, and not to obtain fame or money. To the ones who looked with telescopes to the stars, and the ones who turned the lens inward to microscopes to measure who we are. I wouldn't understand the world the way I do if it hadn't been for your work. For that, I thank you.



Time, Light, and the Distance We Did Not Cross

We have a habit of measuring a life by how far it traveled — the miles logged, the rooms entered, the distance put between the person we were and the person we became. Reach is our proxy for worth. We praise the ones who went far.

But there is a quieter measurement, and the universe is the one keeping it.

I'll admit the first measure is the one I reach for by reflex — I still rank my own years by how far they carried me from where I started. What follows is my attempt to take the other measurement seriously: the one I keep forgetting I am allowed to use.

It begins with a small mistake. Ask how old the Earth is, and the honest unit is years — about four and a half billion of them. Ask how far something is, and the unit is the light year, the distance light crosses in a year, some nine trillion kilometres. Confuse the two — ask how many light years old the Earth is — and you have made a category error, folding a duration into a distance.

And yet the error is wiser than it looks. Out among the stars, distance and time are not two things. To look far is to look back: the light from a star a thousand light years away is a thousand years old by the time it reaches your eye. You never see the distant thing as it is, only as it was. Every length in the sky is also a memory. The mistake was merely early to a truth.

Here is the truth. In relativity, nothing is ever truly still. Everything is always moving through spacetime, and there is one strict rule about that motion: its total speed — through space and through time together — is always the same. It is the speed of light.¹ That is the whole budget, and it cannot be exceeded, only spent. Pour your motion into space, racing across the room, and less is left for time; your clock slows. Sit nearly still, as a slow blue world circling an ordinary star does, and almost the entire allowance goes into the single direction that remains.

So the Earth, drifting gently through space, is hurtling through time at very nearly the speed of light.

There is a consolation buried in that arithmetic, and I have leaned on it more than once: stillness is not the failure of motion but motion poured entirely into lasting. The slow blue world is not idle. On the days I go nowhere, I try to believe I am not either.

Which means the careless question has an answer after all. If the Earth has travelled through time at nearly light-speed for four and a half billion years, then the distance it has covered along that road is four and a half billion light years. The unit was never wrong. We were simply pointing the ruler down an axis no one thinks to measure. The Earth did not go far across space. It went enormously far through time. It barely moved. It lasted — at almost the speed of light, in the one direction none of us can stop moving in.



And now the strange mirror.

Four and a half billion light years is also a distance you can look across. Light that has been travelling that long set out at just about the moment the Earth was forming. So the reach of the planet's endurance and the reach of the cosmos's memory are the same number.² Look far enough out into the dark, and the light arriving now carries the very era that made you. The length of the journey and the depth of the remembrance are one figure. The Earth has travelled exactly far enough through time that the universe, gazing back, can still see it being born.

There is a colour to this, if you care to see it. Light that crosses such distances is stretched along the way, its waves drawn long by the swelling of space, until what set out as fierce blue arrives as a tired, tender red.³ The farther the light has come — the longer it has lasted — the redder it grows. Deep time has a hue. It is the warm end of the spectrum: the colour of embers and late afternoon, the shade a thing turns once it has endured.



So let me hand you the measurement the universe keeps, the one we forget to take. We rank our lives by motion — by conquest and acquisition and the ground we covered, by how far we got from where we began. But the Earth, which that standard would call a failure for having gone essentially nowhere, is the great traveller of this story. Its achievement was never distance. It was duration. It held a direction. It stayed.

I have spent a good many of these essays on rising, on arriving, on going somewhere. This is the one that quietly corrects them. The harder feat, I have come to think, was never the distance covered but the direction held — staying pointed at one thing long enough that it hardened into a life.

And that, I think, is the only trace that moves at the speed of light. Not where you went. How long you bore it. I find I can carry that — it asks less of me than greatness and more of me than comfort: only to last, and to last on purpose. The ripple you leave is not measured across the floor of space but down the long corridor of time — and it is read, when it is finally read, in that patient and forgiving red.

It is late where you are. The world beneath you is not rushing anywhere. It is only lasting, faithfully, at almost the speed of light — and so, in the way that counts, are you.

Notes

1. In relativity an object's motion is shared between space and time so that its total “speed” through spacetime is always c : the faster it moves through space, the slower its clock runs through time (time dilation). Rendered here in plain language rather than equations.
2. The equality of “years endured” and “light-years of look-back distance” is a deliberate poetic correspondence, not a precise cosmological identity — the expansion of space makes look-back time and actual distance diverge at the largest scales. The essay follows the rhyme, not the redshift–distance relation.
3. Cosmological redshift: light from distant sources is stretched to longer, redder wavelengths by the expansion of space itself. The farther the source — the longer the light has travelled — the greater the stretch.

Resonances

further light — kin the piece lasts alongside, beyond the notes

Henri Bergson *Creative Evolution*

Durée: lived time as duration, not distance laid out in space — the essay's central move, named.

Boethius *Consolation V*

The whole of a life possessed at once; time seen under the aspect of eternity.

Ecclesiastes *1:4*

One generation passes and another comes — but the earth abides; the world that stayed.

Marcus Aurelius *Meditations*

Endurance under the cosmic view: not how far you went, but how long and how well you bore it.

Lao Tzu *Tao Te Ching*

The still and lasting outwears the fast and conquering; what endures by not striving.

Carl Sagan *the cosmic perspective*

Look-back time, and a cosmos that can still witness its own beginning.



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On Lasting

Set in a redshift. The longer light travels, the more its colour is stretched toward red; so the piece deepens from violet through garnet to amber — the spectrum of light that has lasted. Read it as the colour of distance, which here is only another word for time.

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