

# Life and the miracle of being



Astronaut William Ander's photograph, *Earthrise*, taken during the Apollo 8 mission, is perhaps the most important picture of all time. The perspective it offers on our planet, of its isolation in the lifeless void of space, is staggering. Never before had the entirety of life on Earth been contained in a single image.

Contrast that with the images that have been coming in from NASA's Mars Curiosity rover since 2012. In their own way, these pictures are just as fascinating - not least because of the technology the Americans have developed to allow us to see the surface of another world in detail. But on another level, the pictures are shockingly bleak; it is a place utterly devoid of life, or even any trace of it save the tracks left by the rover as it trundles alone across the Martian desert.

I find the interest in, and resources devoted to, the exploration of lifeless space extraordinary at this time given the existential crisis that so much life on Earth faces. It's a crisis that is finally being whispered at senior levels of government around the world. This seems like a good time, then, in our conversations and in our photographs, to re-state the "miracle of being". It's hard to impress on people, even those who have looked in wonder at *Earthrise*, that life itself is anything remarkable - it is so ubiquitous on Earth, even if its diversity is dwindling. The real miracle is that any

living individual is here at all. It's easy to understand that, if your great or great great grandfather had died childless in the First World War, you would not be here. But Norwegian author, Jostein Gaarder, dramatically deepens our understanding of this miracle in his novel, *Maya*, by adding an evolutionary perspective. "...my lineage, my family tree, my unbroken line of zygotes and cell divisions - [has] survived millions of generations. In each of these generations I had managed first to divide my cells, then breed, fertilise or lay my eggs and, in the final phase, bear live young. If just one of my millions of ancestors, for example an amphibian living its clammy life in the Devonian... had bitten the dust before sexual maturity, I wouldn't have been sitting on the verandah now...The genetic relay baton [has] been passed from generation to generation hundreds of millions of times."

So, the miracle is not just life itself but the individual lives that populate the Earth today, each with one thing in common: we've all beaten unbelievably slim odds to be here: we've won the Lottery time after time after time. If that understanding doesn't give cause to re-evaluate our relationship with other living things, I don't know what will.

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About 20 years ago, I went to a public lecture hosted by *New Scientist* magazine as part of the Edinburgh

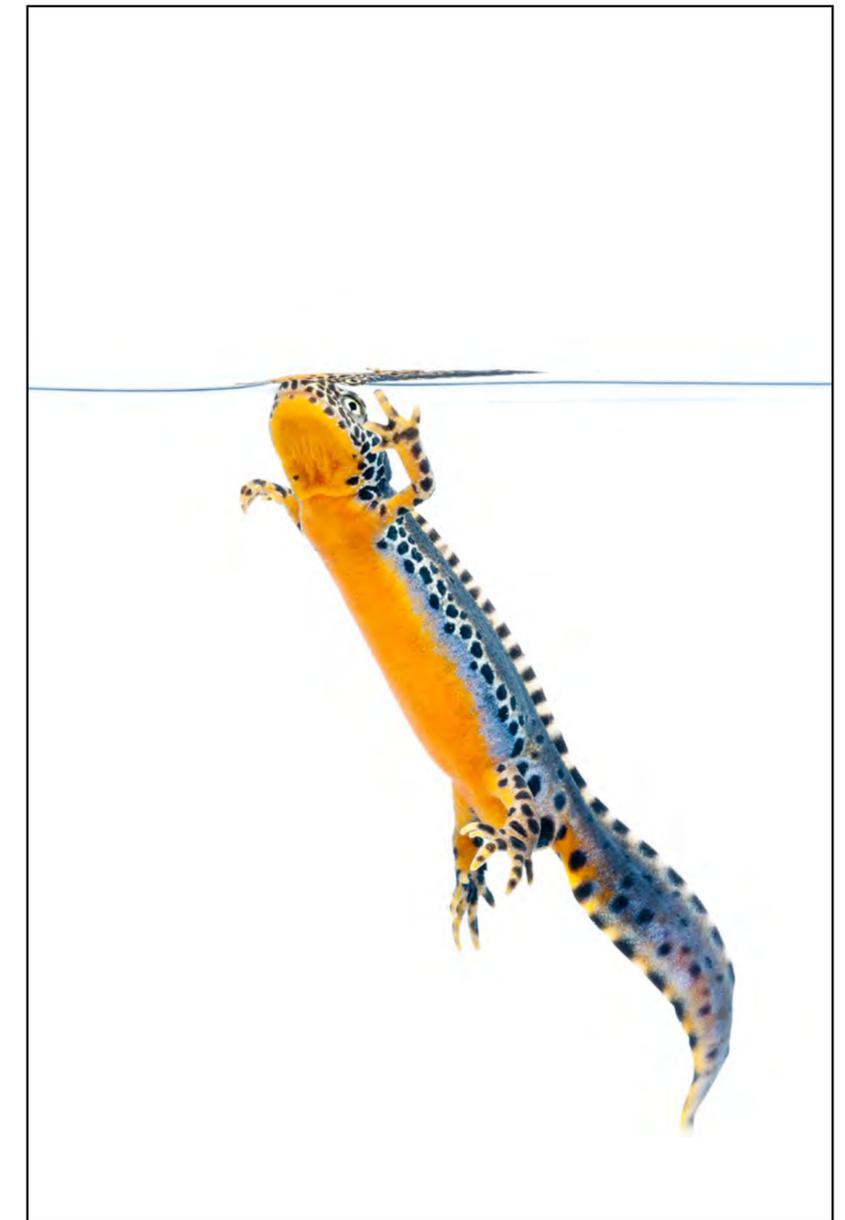
Science Festival. I can't even remember the subject of the debate now but I do recall, as a dry-mouthed member of the public, putting forward the idea that, just as the 20th century had been dominated by the schism between liberal values and those, in turn, of imperialism, fascism and communism, I thought that the 21st century would see a similar divide between people who believed, almost as an article of faith, in the liberal model, with free markets and unlimited economic growth and those who believed that we had to recognise our dependency on natural systems and change our behaviour and economies accordingly. My prediction didn't draw much response; it wasn't a particularly profound insight and, frankly, the liberal order had recently prevailed (again) with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and looked unassailable. The "end of history" had been declared by political economist Francis Fukuyama a few years earlier as the world seemed to be reaching a broad consensus on the "right" form of governance .

In the intervening 20 years, there have been a lot of distractions from this underlying schism, a diversity of righteous zealots that has led us to believe that "the crisis" lies elsewhere, that the demon is "the other". But our abusive relationship with life on Earth remains the fundamental threat to our collective well-being and it is heartening to see it creep up the political

agenda, along with a growing acknowledgement of our collective role in the crisis. And as we find the courage to look our predicament squarely in the eye, the speed of its ascent is sure to increase.

Ultimately, we face a conflict of values. Those on the side of Earth, with its diversity of miraculous lives, have a monumental task to wean people from the ease, comfort and convenience that the liberal order has delivered to some, even as their awareness of its consequences for our fellow travellers grows. Yet, the insupportable loneliness of a place like Mars is no alternative; it shouldn't be a hard sell.

Nature photography, at its core, is all about sharing values. It's fun too, of course, and that has value in itself. But honest work has a role in shaping the new stories we need to start telling ourselves about ourselves and our place in the world. After all, we remain better connected to it than most.



Alpine newt, France. Every living individual on Earth today has beaten impossible odds to be here with us. That deserves some respect.