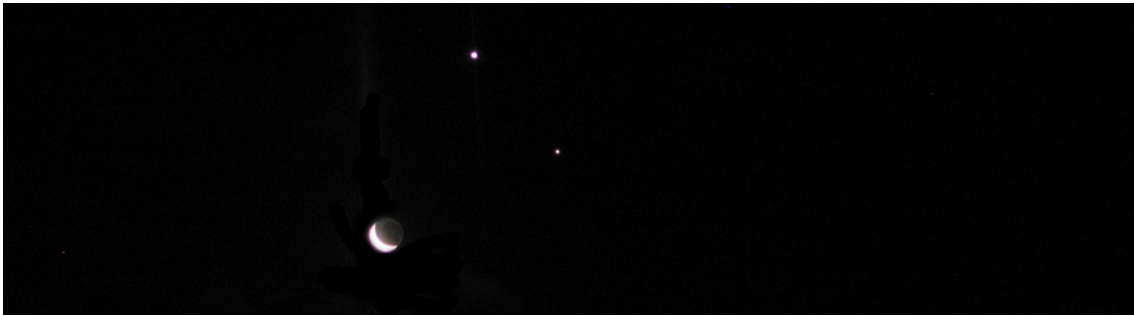


From the Kitchen

24 February 2010



Some nights ago, I was walking my dog through the local streets. As I usually do on such outings, I was musing on life, the universe and everything. I looked up at the part of that universe I could see and immediately saw a very bright star where a bright star ought not to be.

As I stared at it to identify its position amongst the stars I know, it moved. In fact, it was moving steadily. Must be a plane, I thought, with its landing lights on. But no, it wasn't because, as it moved overhead, the brightness didn't change and there were no flashing navigation lights to go with it. It was obviously a satellite, but a brighter one than I had ever seen. It was Iridium 66.

It brought back memories of a clear night in late 1957 when, in country NSW, we stood outside and saw Sputnik glide overhead, a faint 'star' on its way around the Earth.

Most of you reading this would be too young to have witnessed that first manifestation of what became the space race. Sputnik was the first human-made object to be launched into a stable orbit around this planet and frightened the USA into regaining the upper hand in this aspect of the craziness known as the Cold War. It led to men on the moon, robots on Mars and thousands of useful and useless objects whizzing around the Earth. It has also led, of course, to GPS and Google Earth.

An impressionable nine-year-old watching this tiny light move across the sky, I was stimulated into a passion for learning about the stars and galaxies, planets and moons. I ended up learning the positions and names of hundreds of stars. I would spend dreamy hours lying on my back, staring up and trying to picture the three-dimensional arrangement of it all. I struggled to get my mind around the immense distances involved.

This stretching of the imagination beyond things earthly led to my interest in science fiction and I devoured scores of books. It also seems to have sparked my passion for reading about other cultures, in the form of folktales, sagas, myths and faerie-tales.

What all this musing and reading has taught me, is that most of what happens in this world is strange to us and almost all of what happens in the universe is unknown to us and probably unknowable. This leads inevitably to humility or madness, as we strive to define our place in all of this and we search for relevance.

Struggling with the notion of possible irrelevance has led to the development of the bigger stories of creation and explanations of the metaphysical. It also leads to trying to understand our relation to other living things and, in many cases, the hubris of our thinking we are superior.

Lying on a trampoline for a few hours on a clear winter's night (wrapped in a sleeping bag), I would from time to time indulge in a meditation on the universe, watching the stars and occasional planet slide across my field of view. Sometimes a meteor would shoot across, gone almost before I registered its path. I would then contemplate how a grain of matter could create such brightness, rivalling stars billions of times its size.

Those stars may not be there anymore. We wouldn't know. If the nearest star to us exploded or just went out, it would be almost 4¼ years before we knew. With other stars it could be a thousand years or fifty thousand years or more.

We think of telecommunications as being instantaneous. On earth they pretty much are. When we have a human base on Mars, however, we will have to wait between twenty and forty minutes (depending on the relative positions of the planets in their orbits), for a response to anything we say. I remember when international phone calls were a bit like that. We would have to book a call to the Netherlands well in advance. When I got to speak with my grandmother, the 2- to 3-second delays seemed like minutes and made for stilted conversations.

And what about those people who worry about someone eavesdropping on their conversations and emails? At the time of Sputnik we had a phone on a party line. This meant that calls were not directed to a particular house and anyone along the line could (and did) listen in. And snail mail was vulnerable to being steamed open and read by the friendly lady in the local general-store-come-post-office. She was the source of much interesting information about people in the community.

I still get a thrill lying outside and staring up at the night sky, contemplating the wonder of it all. Apart from the number of satellites, little up there seems to have changed since 1957.