

00:10

[Oliver Jeffers]

00:11

[An ode to living on Earth]

00:14

Hello. I'm sure by the time I get to end of this sentence, given how I talk, you'll all have figured out that I'm from a place called planet Earth. Earth is pretty great. It's home to us. And germs. Those [blip] take a back seat for the time being, because believe it or not, they're not the only thing going on.

00:36

This planet is also home to cars, brussels sprouts; those weird fish things that have their own headlights; art, fire, fire extinguishers, laws, pigeons, bottles of beer, lemons and light bulbs; Pinot noir and paracetamol; ghosts, mosquitoes, flamingos, flowers, the ukulele, elevators and cats, cat videos, the internet; iron beams, buildings and batteries, all ingenuity and bright ideas, all known life ... and a whole bunch of other stuff. Pretty much everything we know and ever heard of. It's my favorite place, actually. This small orb, floating in a cold and lonely part of the cosmos. Oh, the accent is from Belfast, by the way, which is ... here. Roughly.

01:17

You may think you know this planet Earth, as you're from here. But chances are, you probably haven't thought about the basics in a while. I thought I knew it. Thought I was an expert, even. Until, that is, I had to explain the entire place, and how it's supposed to work, to someone who had never been here before. Not what you might think, although my dad always did say the sure sign of intelligent life out there is that they haven't bothered trying to contact us. It was actually my newborn son I was trying to explain things to. We'd never been parents before, my wife and I, and so treated him like most guests when he arrived home for the first time, by giving him the tour. This is where you live, son. This room is where we make food at. This is the room we keep our collection of chairs, and so on. It's refreshing, explaining how our planet works to a zero-year-old. But after the laughs, and once the magnitude that new humans know absolutely nothing settles on you and how little you know either, explaining the whole planet becomes quite intimidating. But I tried anyway.

02:17

As I walked around those first few weeks, narrating the world as I saw it, I began to take notes of the ridiculous things I was saying. The notes slowly morphed into a letter intended for my son once he learned to read. And that letter became a book about the basic principles of what it is to be a human living on Earth in the 21st century. Some things are really obvious. Like, the planet is made of two parts: land and sea. Some less obvious until you think about them. Like, time. Things can sometimes move slowly here on Earth. But more often, they move quickly. So use your time well, it will be gone before you know it. Or people. People come in all different shapes, sizes and colors. We may all look different, act different and sound different, but don't be fooled. We are all people.

03:11

It doesn't skip me that of all the places in the universe, people only live on Earth, can only live on Earth. And even then, only on some of the dry bits. There's only a very small part of the surface of our planet that is actually habitable to human life, and squeezed in here is where all of us live. It's easy to forget when you're up close to the dirt, the rocks, the foliage, the concrete of our lands, just how limited the room for maneuvering is. From a set of eyes close to the ground, the horizon feels like it goes forever. After all, it's not an every-day ritual to consider where we are on the ball of our planet and where that ball is in space.

03:46

I didn't want to tell my son the same story of countries that we were told where I was growing up in Northern Ireland. That we were from just a small parish, which ignores life outside its immediate concerns. I wanted to try to feel what it was like to see our planet as one system, as a single object, hanging in space. To do this, I would need to switch from flat drawings for books to 3D sculpture for the street, and I'd need almost 200 feet, a New York City block, to build a large-scale model of the moon, the Earth and us.

04:17

This project managed to take place on New York City's High Line park last winter, on the 50th anniversary of Apollo 11's mission around the Moon. After its installation, I was able to put on a space helmet with my son and launch, like Apollo 11 did half a century ago, towards the Moon. We circled around and looked back at us. What I felt was how lonely it was there in the dark. And I was just pretending. The Moon is the only object even remotely close to us. And at the scale of this project, where our planet was 10 feet in diameter, Mars, the next planet, will be the size of a yoga ball and a couple of miles away.

04:55

Although borders are not visible from space, on my sculpture, every single border was drawn in. But rather than writing the country names on the carved-up land, I wrote over and over again, "people live here, people live here." "People live here." And off on the Moon, it was written, "No one lives here." Often, the obvious things aren't all that obvious until you think about them.

05:20

Seeing anything from a vast enough distance changes everything, as many astronauts have experienced. And human eyes have only ever seen our Earth from as far as the Moon, really. It's quite a ways further before we get to the edges of our own Solar System. And even out to other stars, to the constellations. There is actually only one point in the entire cosmos that is present in all constellations of stars, and that presence is here, planet Earth. Those pictures we have made up for the clusters of stars only make sense from this point of view down here. Their stories only make sense here on Earth. And only something to us. To people. We are creatures of stories. We are the stories we tell, we're the stories we're told.

06:08

Consider briefly the story of human civilization on Earth. It tells of the ingenuity, elegance, generous and nurturing nature of a species that is also self-focused, vulnerable and defiantly protective. We, the people, shield the flame of our existence from the raw, vast elements outside our control, the great beyond. Yet it is always to the flame we look. "For all we know," when said as a statement, it means the sum total of all knowledge. But when said another way, "for all we know," it means that we do not know at all. This is the beautiful, fragile drama of civilization. We are the actors and spectators of a cosmic play that means the world to us here, but means nothing anywhere else. Possibly not even that much down here, either.

06:58

If we truly thought about our relationship with our boat, with our Earth, it might be more of a story of ignorance and greed. As is the case with Fausto, a man who believed he owned everything and set out to survey what was his. He easily claims ownership of a flower, a sheep, a tree and a field. The lake and the mountain prove harder to conquer, but they, too, surrender. It is in trying to own the open sea where his greed proves his undoing, when, in a fit of arrogance, he climbs overboard to show that sea who is boss. But he does not understand, slips beneath the waves, sinks to the bottom. The sea was sad for him but carried on being the sea. As do all the other objects of his ownership, for the fate of Fausto does not matter to them.

07:49

For all the importance in the cosmos we believe we hold, we'd have nothing if not for this Earth. While it would keep happily spinning, obviously without us.

08:00

On this planet, there are people. We have gone about our days, sometimes we look up and out, mostly we look down and in. Looking up and by drawing lines between the lights in the sky, we've attempted to make sense out of chaos. Looking down, we've drawn lines across the land to know where we belong and where we don't. We do mostly forget that these lines that connect the stars and those lines that divide the land live only in our heads. They, too, are stories. We carry out our everyday routines and rituals according to the stories we most believe in, and these days, the story is changing as we write it.

08:37

There is a lot of fear in this current story, and until recently, the stories that seemed to have the most power are those of bitterness, of how it had all gone wrong for us individually and collectively. It has been inspiring to watch how the best comes from the worst. How people are waking up in this time of global reckoning to the realization that our connections with each other are some of the most important things we have.

08:59

But stepping back. For all we've had to lament, we spend very little time relishing the single biggest thing that has ever gone right for us. That we are here in the first place, that we are alive at all. That we are still alive. A million and a half years after finding a box of matches, we haven't totally burned the house down. Yet. The chances of being here are infinitesimal. Yet here we are. Perils and all.

09:23

There have never been more people living on Earth. Using more stuff. And it's become obvious that many of the old systems we invented for ourselves are obsolete. And we have to build new ones. If it wasn't germs, our collective fire might suffocate us before long. As we watch the wheels of industry grind to a halt, the machinery of progress become silent, we have the wildest of opportunities to hit the reset button. To take a different path.

09:51

Here we are on Earth. And life on Earth is a wonderful thing. It looks big, this Earth, but there are lots of us on here. Seven and a half billion at last count, with more showing up every day. Even so, there is still enough for everyone, if we all share a little. So please, be kind.

10:14

When you think of it another way, if Earth is the only place where people live, it's actually the least lonely place in the universe. There are plenty of people to be loved by and plenty of people to love. We need each other. We know that now, more than ever.

10:32

Good night.