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LOOKING FOR LIFE ON A FLAT EARTH

What a burgeoning movement says about science, solace, and how a theory becomes truth.

By Alan Burdick May 30, 2018

On the last Sunday afternoon in March, Mike Hughes, a sixty-two-year-old limousine driver from Apple Valley, California, successfully launched himself above the Mojave Desert in a homemade steam-powered rocket. He'd been trying for years, in one way or another. In 2002, Hughes set a Guinness World Record for the longest ramp jump—a hundred and three feet—in a limo, a stretch Lincoln Town Car. In 2014, he allegedly flew thirteen hundred and seventy-four feet in a garage-built rocket and was injured when it crashed. He planned to try again in 2016, but his Kickstarter campaign, which aimed to raise a hundred and fifty thousand dollars, netted just two supporters and three hundred and ten dollars. Further attempts were scrubbed—mechanical problems, logistical hurdles, hassles from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. Finally, a couple of months ago, he made good. Stuff was leaking, bolts needed tightening, but at around three o'clock, and with no countdown, Hughes blasted off from a portable ramp—attached to a motorhome he'd bought through Craigslist—soared to nearly nineteen hundred feet, and, after a minute or so, parachuted less than gently back to Earth.

For all of that, Hughes might have attracted little media attention were it not for his outspoken belief that the world is flat. "Do I believe the Earth is shaped like a Frisbee? I believe it is," he told the Associated Press. "Do I know for sure? No. That's why I want to go up in space."

Hughes converted fairly recently. In 2017, he called in to the Infinite Plane Society, a live-stream YouTube channel that discusses Earth's flatness and other matters, to announce his beliefs and ambitions and ask for the community's endorsement. Soon afterward, The Daily Plane, a flat-Earth information site ("News, Media and Science in a post-Globe Reality"), sponsored a GoFundMe campaign that raised more than

seventy-five hundred dollars on Hughes's behalf, enabling him to make the Mojave jump with the words "Research Flat Earth" emblazoned on his rocket.

To be clear, Hughes did not expect his flight to demonstrate Earth's flatness to him; nineteen hundred feet up, or even a mile, is too low of a vantage point. And he doesn't like that the mainstream media has portrayed things otherwise. This flight was just practice. His flat-Earth mission will come sometime in the future, when he will launch a rocket from a balloon (a "rockoon") and go perhaps seventy miles up, where the splendor of our disk will be evident beyond dispute.

If you are only just waking up to the twenty-first century, you should know that, according to a growing number of people, much of what you've been taught about our planet is a lie: Earth really is flat. We know this because dozens, if not hundreds, of YouTube videos describe the coverup. We've listened to podcasts—Flat Earth Conspiracy, The Flat Earth Podcast—that parse the minutiae of various flat-Earth models, and the very wonkiness of the discussion indicates that the over-all theory is as sound and valid as any other scientific theory. We know because on a clear, cool day it is sometimes possible, from southwestern Michigan, to see the Chicago skyline, more than fifty miles away—an impossibility were Earth actually curved. We know because, last February, Kyrie Irving, the Boston Celtics point guard, told us so. "The Earth is flat," he said. "It's right in front of our faces. I'm telling you, it's right in front of our faces. They lie to us." We know because, last November, a year and a day after Donald Trump was elected President, more than five hundred people from across this flat Earth paid as much as two hundred and forty-nine dollars each to attend the first-ever Flat Earth Conference, in a suburb of Raleigh, North Carolina.

"Look around you," Darryle Marble, the first featured speaker on the first morning of the conference, told the audience. "You'll notice there's not a single tinfoil hat." He added, "We are normal people that have an abnormal perspective."

The unsettling thing about spending two days at a convention of people who believe that Earth is flat isn't the possibility that you, too, might come to accept their world view, although I did worry a little about that. Rather, it's the very real likelihood that, after sitting through hours of presentations on "scientism," lightning angels, and NASA's many conspiracies—the moon-landing hoax, the International Fake Station, so-called satellites—and in chatting with I.T. specialists, cops, college students,

and fashionably dressed families with young children, all of them unfailingly earnest and lovely, you will come to actually understand why a growing number of people are dead certain that Earth is flat. Because that truth is unnerving.

The November conference was held in a darkened ballroom of an Embassy Suites near the Raleigh airport. Dozens of rows of chairs had been set out and nearly all were filled. To my right, a young couple with a stroller listened intently; a man in front of me wore a T-shirt with the words "They Lied" across the back. Onstage, Marble recounted his awakening. Marble is African-American and was one of a handful of people of color in the room. He had enlisted in the Army and gone to Iraq after 9/11; when he returned home, to Arkansas, he "got into this whole conspiracy situation," he said.

For two years, Marble and his girlfriend drank in YouTube. "We went from one thing to another to another—Sandy Hook, 9/11, false flags," he said. "We got into the Bilderberg, Rothschilds, Illuminati. All these general things that one ends up looking into when you go on here, because you look at one video and then another suggestion pops up along the same lines." Finally, he had to step away. "You come to a place where

you start to feel that reality is just kind of scary," he said. "You'll find out that nothing, ultimately, is what it seems to be. I hit my low point, where everything was just terrifying."

Marble found the light in his YouTube sidebar. While looking for videos related to "Under the Dome," a TV sci-fi drama, he came across "Under the Dome," a two-hour film, which takes the form of a documentary, by Mark K. Sargent, one of the leading flat-Earth proselytizers. The flat-Earth movement had burbled along in relative darkness until February of 2015, when Sargent uploaded "Flat Earth Clues," a series of well-produced videos that, the Enclosed World site notes, "delves into the possibility of our human civilization actually being inside a 'Truman Show'-like enclosed system, and how it's been hidden from the public." (Access to those videos and more is available on Sargent's personal Web site, for ten dollars a month.) It announced itself as "a Reader's Digest version" of the flat-Earth theory; Marble watched it over and over, all weekend.

"Each thing started to make that much more sense," he said. "I was already primed to receive the whole flat-Earth idea, because we had already come to the conclusion that we were being deceived about so many other things. So of course they would lie to us about this."

If we can agree on anything anymore, it's that we live in a post-truth era. Facts are no longer correct or incorrect; everything is potentially true unless it's disagreeable, in which case it's fake. Recently, Lesley Stahl, of "60 Minutes," revealed that, in an interview after the 2016 election, Donald Trump told her that the reason he maligns the press is "to discredit you all and demean you all so that when you write negative stories about me no one will believe you." Or, as George Costanza put it, coming from the opposite direction, "It's not a lie if you believe it."

The flat Earth is the post-truth landscape. As a group, its residents view themselves as staunch empiricists, their eyes wide open. The plane truth, they say, can be grasped in experiments that anyone can do at home. For instance, approach a large body of water and hold up a ruler to the horizon: it's flat all the way across. What pond, lake, or sea have you ever seen where the surface of its waters curves? Another argument holds that, if Earth were truly spherical, an airplane flying above it would need to constantly adjust its nose downward to avoid flying straight into space. If, say, you flew on a plane and put a spirit level—one of those levels that you buy at the hardware store, with a capsule of liquid and an air bubble in the middle—on your tray table, the level should reveal a slight downward inclination. But it doesn't: the level is level, the flight is level, the nose of the plane is level, and therefore the surface of Earth must be level. Marble performed this experiment himself, recorded it, posted it on YouTube, and a co-worker started a Reddit thread that linked to it. Soon Marble had twenty-two thousand followers and a nickname, the Spirit-Level Guy.

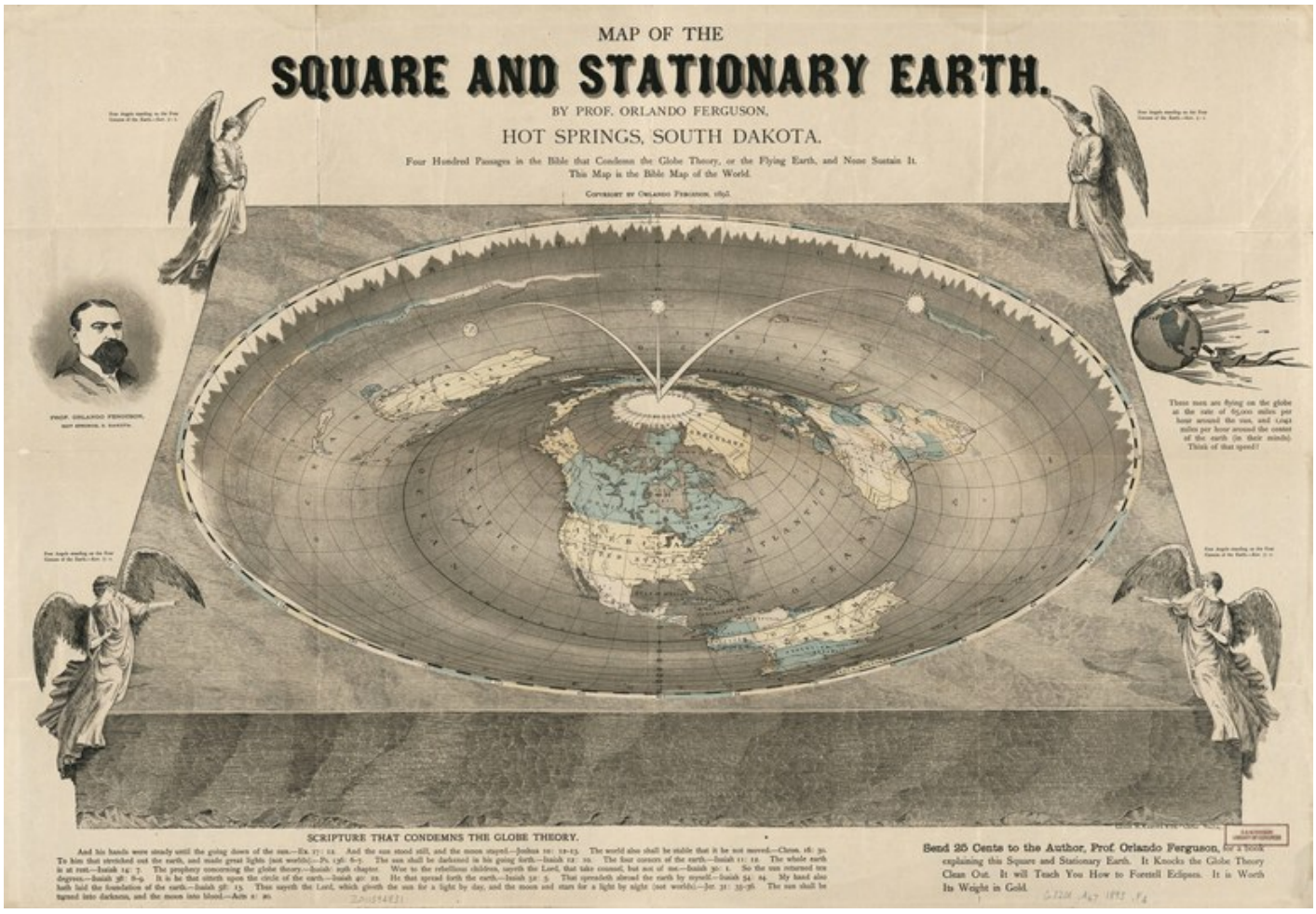
"We're not trying to express any degree of intellectual superiority," he said at the conference. "I'm just trying to wake people up to the idea that they've been lied to. It's what you would do with any friend."

The modern case for a flat Earth derives largely from "Zetetic Astronomy: Earth Not a Globe," a book published, in 1865, by a smooth-talking English inventor and religious fundamentalist named Samuel Rowbotham. I found a copy at a bookseller's table in the corridor just outside the conference ballroom, alongside books about the Revelations and New Testament apocrypha. The vender, a friendly woman who looked to be in her late sixties, offered her thoughts on Earth's flatness and the enshrouding secrecy; I moved on when she got to "the Jews."

Rowbotham began espousing his theory in the eighteen-forties, writing and lecturing under the pseudonym Parallax. He envisaged a disk, with the North Pole at the center and Antarctica a wall of ice around the perimeter. The sun, moon, and stars? All less than a thousand miles away and "much smaller than the earth from which they are measured." Rowbotham proceeded by way of "zetetic" reasoning (from the Greek *zeteo*, meaning "to seek or inquire," he explained), arguing that the facts show that Earth is flat whereas the theory of its roundness is unproven. He had demonstrated this himself at a drainage canal in the east of England. The canal runs arrow-straight for six miles,

and Rowbotham, standing at one end, claimed to be able to see a boat at the other. (The planet's curvature drops eight inches for every mile of distance squared, so an object six miles away ought to have been twenty-four feet below the sight line.)

Rowbotham's ideas gained traction, and when he died, in 1884, his followers formed the Universal Zetetic Society. It published a magazine, *The Earth Not a Globe Review*, that decried the teaching of astronomy to schoolchildren, ridiculed evolution, and entertained alternative theories, including the possibility that Earth is a cube. And it developed a base in the United States; until the nineteen-forties, the town of Zion, north of Chicago, followed a strict religious code that embraced a flat-Earth doctrine. The Universal Zetetic Society sputtered out but was revived under different names over the years—in 1956, 1972, and 2004. The core model remained largely unchanged from Rowbotham's day, although it was updated to account for space travel and other mid-twentieth-century fictions.



A map from 1893 portrays Earth as square and stationary and warns of Biblical interdiction against the notion of a round Earth flying through space.

Illustration Courtesy Orlando Ferguson / L.H. Everts & Co. / Library of Congress

I encountered Robbie Davidson, the organizer of the conference, in a corridor outside the ballroom. Davidson is the director and sole employee of Kryptoz Media, a company based in Edmonton, Canada. He is tall and sharp-featured, and when he speaks his sentences spill into one another. He told me that he was turned on to the flat-Earth scene in 2015; before that, Kryptoz was marketing cryptocurrencies to everyday consumers. He described the modern flat-Earth community as a confluence of three strains of thought. "There's the conspiratorial," he said. "It's like, 'That's kind of weird with the moon landing. Maybe I'll look into it. What else could they be lying about?'" The second is "the scientific-minded," people who "just want to go out and do the experiments." The third, Davidson said, "is the spiritual—people that want to say, 'Wait a minute, what would happen if I took the Bible literally?'" In style and substance, the flat-Earth movement is a close cousin of creationism. At the end of the conference, Davidson would be screening his new documentary, "Scientism Exposed 2," which dismisses dinosaurs, evolution, gravitational waves, and a spherical Earth as part of a broad agenda "to hide the true creator of Creation," according to the trailer.

Davidson was pleased with the turnout in Raleigh and was already planning for the 2018 conference, in Denver; another, in Canada, will be held this August. "More people are waking up," he said. Davidson was careful to note that the conferences are unaffiliated with the Flat Earth Society, which, he said, promotes a model in which Earth is not a stationary plane, with the sun, moon, and stars inside a dome, but a disk flying through space. "They make it look incredibly ridiculous," he told me recently. "A flying pancake in space is preposterous."

Here are some reasons why you may think that Earth is actually a rotating sphere. For one, some of the ancient Greeks said so: if the moon is round, Earth must be, too (Pythagoras); as you move north or south from the equator, you see a changing array of stars and constellations (Aristotle); you can calculate Earth's circumference by comparing the lengths of the shadows of two tall sticks placed many miles apart (Eratosthenes). More recently, we've noticed that solar noon—the point in the day when the sun is highest—doesn't happen everywhere on Earth at the same time. (Time zones were invented to address this dilemma). Also, the higher you climb in elevation, the farther into the horizon you can see; if Earth were flat, you'd see an equal distance —to the edge of the world, with a strong enough telescope and an unobstructed view— regardless of altitude.

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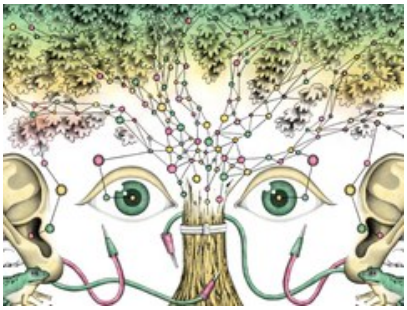

A Day in the Life of a Tree

By M. R. O'Connor

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Human engineering seemingly takes Earth's curvature into account. Lighthouses are deliberately built tall so that their beams can be seen from ships far away, over the intervening curve of sea. Radio towers send their signals dozens or hundreds of miles by bouncing them off the ionosphere, which wouldn't be necessary if Earth were flat. A long bridge appears flat because its span parallels Earth, but its supports betray the curvature; the towers of the Verrazano-Narrows, in New York, are more than an inch and a half farther apart at the top than at the bases. And, of course, we have photographic evidence of a globular planet—millions of examples since the nineteen-fifties, taken by spacecraft and orbiting satellites.

Flat-Earthers have lists of reasons why round-Earthers—globers, globetards—are wrong. Perhaps the most comprehensive is "200 Proofs that Earth is Not a Spinning Ball," a video posted to YouTube by Eric Dubay, a yoga instructor who regards himself as the true modern reviver of flat-Earth philosophy. (Dubay has also gained attention for his Holocaust denialism.) Many of the proofs fall into the you-can't-definitively-prove-that-I'm-wrong category. If Earth is spinning on its axis at a thousand miles per hour, as scientists say, why isn't there a powerful wind blowing exclusively from one

direction? (Dubay: "The proof that the Earth is at rest is proved by kite flying.") If Earth is a ball, why are there no direct flights across Antarctica from Chile to New Zealand? ("These flights aren't made because they're impossible.")

Of course, such arguments prompt further questions. If Earth is actually flat, why does the sun rise and set? Where does it go at night? If it's true that the sun and the moon never actually dip below the horizon but instead travel in wide circles around the North Pole, what keeps them aloft? And what about all those satellites I've seen being launched into space?

The responses recede along a path from half-baked to evasive. The sun is barely three dozen miles wide (see Thomas Winship's "Zetetic Cosmogony," from 1899), so of course its rays don't illuminate the whole of Earth at once; as it moves farther from you it appears closer to the horizon, just as the farthest in a series of streetlights appears closest to the ground. And those televised rocket launches? They're fake. (Notice how the camera angle quickly shifts from a ground-up shot to one supposedly on the rocket itself, looking back toward Earth. And all of those alleged images of a round Earth were Photoshopped.) Yes, you've been told, or you've read, that Antarctica sees weeks of twenty-four-hour daylight—but have you ever been there and seen it for yourself? Gravity, too, is just another theory; flat-Earthers believe that objects simply fall. (" 'Gravity,' they love that one," Marble said, using air quotes. "Grabbity—with two 'B's.")

"Facts are not true just because they're facts, if that makes any sense," Jeran Campanella, who soon followed Marble to the stage, told the audience. Campanella is in his late thirties, with a serious face and a close-shaved head. Like Sargent, he gained prominence through a series of YouTube videos exposing the round-Earth hoax, although he has personalized the flat-Earth outlook by labelling it "Jeranism." ("No, it is not a religion," his Web site notes. "It is simply my name with 'ism' added at the end.") His video presentation had glitched out, so he worked from his notes, reiterating the movement's core belief: ninety-nine per cent of received wisdom is questionable; if you can't observe it for yourself, it can't be trusted. "It simply comes down to, Have you been there? Have you been to Saturn? Have you been to Jupiter?" Campanella said.

To insiders, the message is empowering. Trust in your senses. Don't accept the word of a talking head. (Set aside the paradox of a man onstage imploring his large audience to

ignore him.) “We all live in the world; we can see what’s real and what’s not,” Campanella said. “Science is really an excuse for people to be stupid.” Mike Hughes, the rocket builder, told the A.P. in November, “I don’t believe in science. I know about aerodynamics and fluid dynamics and how things move through the air. But that’s not science, that’s just a formula.” The conference audience was frequently encouraged to “do your own research,” which mostly seemed to involve watching more YouTube videos and boning up on Scripture.

Flat-Earth logic is by turns mesmerizing and maddening. There is no gravity, nothing to restrain it, but as a theory it explains fewer phenomena than the theory it seeks to supplant. In the corridor, I met a documentary filmmaker—there were several milling around at the conference—who had been following the flat-Earth community for months. His face bore a look of despair. “If you’re going to dismiss everything as a hoax, you’d better have something clear to replace it,” he said, his voice rising toward apoplexy. “If you tell me your car isn’t blue and I ask you, ‘Well, what color is your car?,’ don’t fucking tell me, ‘I don’t know, but it’s not blue.’ What color is your fucking car?!”

When I reëntered the ballroom, the audience was watching a short documentary that managed, within two minutes, to mention NORAD, the Pentagon, the falsehood of evolution, NASA, the 9/11 hoax, George W. Bush, and Stephen Hawking. (“Do you really believe he’s had A.L.S. for fifty-three years?”) I had already heard references to other well-known conspiracies—Pizzagate; Sandy Hook; the mass shootings in Las Vegas, Paris, and Orlando. One attractive aspect of the flat-Earth theory, it seemed, was that it served nicely as an umbrella for all the other coverups. “It’s the mother of all conspiracies,” more than one person told me.

Many things, the flat-Earthers understand, are being hidden. God, of course. Also, beyond the Antarctic ice wall lie thousands of miles of land—“an America 2.0,” one speaker said—that powerful people are keeping to themselves. Onstage, Mark Sargent had suggested that the world was run by “a small, scary group of smoking men sitting around a table.” NASA, meanwhile, is hoarding billions of dollars in taxpayer money for its operations, which include guarding the ice wall with armed employees and paying frizzy-haired actors to pretend to float in zero gravity. The astronauts are Freemasons, sworn to secrecy. The other workers, the engineers and functionaries, have either been duped or don’t want to speak out, for fear of losing their jobs.

I wondered aloud how a conspiracy so vast—decades old, involving every space agency and airline pilot in the world, and requiring the coöperation and silence of tens of thousands of underpaid Photoshop grunts—could have been kept under wraps. "Most of the lower levels of government are not in on it because of a handy practice called compartmentalization," one man told me. That word came up a lot. "I don't think that all scientists are lying," another man said. "The teachers aren't lying. It's just compartmentalized—they don't know." Another attendee offered himself as evidence: he worked for a contractor building a supercomputer for a national laboratory, but he no idea what his co-workers in other government departments did. "You're familiar with compartmentalization?" another man, a former Marine, said. "It's easy to do when only a few hundred people are in on it. And they're all Satanists and Luciferians."

At five-thirty, the conference broke for the day and the crowd spilled out into the hotel atrium for happy hour. I needed a drink, and, to my surprise, Evangelical flat-Earthers sometimes do, too; many had gravitated, or perhaps simply fallen, toward the bar, where they talked excitedly among themselves and ate pretzel snacks. Several of the speakers, including Sargent and Campanella, were surrounded by admirers who were seeing them for the first time in person. The atmosphere was convivial, like a class reunion.

"It's a big family," a man named Ben Campbell told me. He gestured toward the hotel restaurant across the atrium: "I could walk into there and sit down with anyone!" Campbell was from Las Vegas and wore a name tag that read "Ben from Vegas." In Vegas, Campbell organizes a weekly flat-Earther meetup at a local bar. There are flat-Earth meetups in cities around the country; the one in Denver, where the next Flat Earth Conference will be held, is particularly active. The Vegas chapter draws about three dozen people and the number has been growing, Campbell said; for many, it was the one place where they felt comfortable expressing their ideas.

Believing in a flat Earth is hard work; there is so much to relearn. The price of open-mindedness is isolation. "It took me about four months before I could talk to someone outside the apartment about this," Marble said during his presentation. "You've gotta be ready to be called crazy." Several people described the relief of "coming out" as a flat-Earther. "You can tell people you're gay, you can tell people you're Christian, but you don't get ridiculed like a flat-Earther," I overheard one woman say. "It's really that bad." At the bar, I fell into conversation with a woman who was attending a real-estate

conference in the hotel. She asked what my conference was about; when I told her, she doubled over with laughter. I cringed a little, protectively, and glanced around to see if anyone had heard her.

The reward is existential solace. This, I came to understand, was the real draw, the thing that could make, say, an unemployed clerical worker drive twelve hours, alone, from Michigan to Raleigh. To believe in a flat Earth is to belong not only to a human community but to sit, once again, at the center of the cosmos. The standard facts of astronomy are emotionally untenable—a planet spinning at a thousand miles per hour, a mote in a galaxy of unimaginable scale, itself a mote in the vast and expanding universe. "That, to me, is a huge problem," Campanella said. "You are a created individual. This is a created place. It's not an accident; it's not an explosion in space; it's not random molecules joining together."

You, we, are special. "It's like God is patting me on the shoulder, saying, 'You deserve this!' " a man from New Orleans told me. He was a trucker, the son of a former newscaster, and an occasional musician. As we were talking, an older man in a wheelchair approached and, in a drawl, introduced himself and asked if we were Christians. He brought up the notion of infinite space and the lack of a creator. "How can people live with that?" he asked.

"Those people are fucking miserable," the trucker said. "They're so unhappy."

The footing on this flat Earth is unstable. At the conference, several speakers made reference to "shills" within the community, people purporting to espouse the theory but who in fact belong to some deep-state counterintelligence program aimed at making the movement seem laughable. In 2016, Dubay, of the "200 Proofs" video, called out Sargent, Campanella, and other figures as "suspected controlled opposition shills," and last year in a radio interview he called the November conference a "shill-fest." Even the flat-Earth bureaucracy is suspect. At the end of the conference's second day, a panelist mentioned a plan to set up a nonprofit to carry on the work. This brought a rebuke from a woman in the audience. "You had me up until I heard the gentleman say, 'The reason we had to scramble to get the 501(c)(3),' " she said. "In my research, I found out that's a Luciferian contract."

Even Samuel Rowbotham, the founding father of the modern flat Earth, was suspected of not actually believing the theory he popularized. In 1884, Henry Ossipoff Wolfson, a former secretary of the Zetetic Society, wrote a scathing exposé on his "old friend." He noted that Rowbotham, a.k.a. Parallax, was "an accomplished quack" who went by several pseudonyms, including Dr. Samuel Birley. This Dr. Birley, who was not a doctor in the medical (or any) sense, was known for selling Birley's Phosphorus, "the world's best nerve restorer," which promised to cure a long list of ailments, including mumps, deafness, hair loss, varicose veins, epilepsy, and spinal disease. The notion of a flat Earth, Wolfson wrote, was "only one of the means for decoying the suffering part of humanity, for whose benefit he pretends to live, but whose units, in the meanwhile, assist him in enlarging his fortune, over which he keeps most careful watch."

The flat Earth was perhaps a scam, an emotional salve with no basis in physical reality. Now it has become both real and surreal, like a performance-art piece in which nobody can tell the actors, stagehands, and audience apart. "Do you think Trump knows? Do you think he knows that space is fake?" Campanella asked at one point. When I pressed Davidson on whether he truly thinks Earth is flat, he replied, "Well, I don't know one hundred per cent, but I would say that I'm very sure what it's not. I definitely do not believe that we're a spinning ball flying through space." If nothing else, the flat-Earth community has tapped into a form of mental perpetual motion: if you think it, it must be true. Solipsism is the new empiricism.

More than once at the conference, I heard the flat-Earth "debate" depicted as a Biblical confrontation. "This is a struggle between good and evil, the soldiers of light versus darkness," Marble said. Maybe he's right. Maybe this is how Lucifer arrives: not in a spotlight but cloaked in fog, creeping in, sowing ignorance and doubt. The devil is in the lack of detail or any regard for it.

"So many people in today's world simply accept what they're told," Campanella said. "Whether it's about their beliefs, whether it's about their science, whether it's about where you live. And if you're going to accept what you're told, you need to be open to the fact that people will always lie to you. . . . People will lie to you. If they can get one over on you, if they can do something that makes you less knowledgeable, that makes them make more money, that makes you into a slave, then they'll do it. I should tell you that."

I must tell you, as a friend, that I agree completely.

Alan Burdick is the author, most recently, of "Why Time Flies: A Mostly Scientific Investigation." *Read more »*

Video

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