

Matter of Perspective

Stephen Clark had been listening to his radio for hours. He wasn't listening to music, news or talk radio. He mostly was listening to static. Stephen was one of those dreaded people in many neighborhoods. He was a ham radio operator. Living within the regulations of home owners associations and deed restrictions presented a challenge, but one Stephen accepted begrudgingly. After all, what choice did he have? He could live 40 miles from work in the middle of the country, but with fuel costs being what they were that was impractical. So, he simply found ways to enjoy his hobby in spite of the best efforts of those who considered him to be the plague of the neighborhood.

Stephen realized that he probably got blamed every time any TV or radio in the area hiccupped, but there was little he could do about that. He knew this in spite of the fact that he had done everything imaginable to prevent his station from causing any interference. On top of that he actually seldom transmitted, being much more inclined to listen than talk. So he sat there in the semi-darkness of his radio shack, which was really a spare bedroom, and listened while turning dials to listen for whatever was there to be heard.

He was tuning across the 6 meter band even though it was unlikely that he would hear anything at this time of the evening during a poor part of the sunspot cycle. Still, sometimes the bands would surprise you with an opening to strange and exotic places with no warning. That was what Stephen was hoping for as he was slowly tuning across the band. As he inched his way along, he began to hear an off-pitch voice. He deftly tuned to the frequency of the transmitting station only to hear a very unusual transmission.

"Testing, testing, 1... 2... 3... 4... 5... Testing on an open channel."

The fact that someone was testing was not all that unusual. What was unusual was the accent that Stephen could not place, the failure to identify, and the repeating of this same sequence over and over with exactly 15 second breaks. Stephen listened to the sequence repeat several times and finally concluded the only way he was going to find out what this was about would be to ask.

"QRZed, QRZed the station on frequency. Do you copy WB4XYZ? Go ahead," Stephen spoke into the microphone then he waited. He realized that there was some reaction to his call because the announcement did not repeat at the end of its 15 second break. Then he heard a response.

"WB4XYZ hello. Do you hear this station and understand me?" the strange voice asked.

"Yes, I understand you fine. You have a solid 5 by 5 signal here. Name here is Steve," Stephen always shortened his name over the radio. "What's your call please? Go ahead."

"WB4XYZ Steve hello. My English is not very good. I had been learning it. I don't understand what you mean by call. I am a traveler and am passing through. I have detected signals on several frequencies but have not attempted any contact until now."

"Unidentified station, do you have a license? Go ahead," Stephen responded with just a touch of irritation.

"Sorry I don't understand about license. I mean no harm. I am just trying to make contact. It is difficult because I do not completely understand your language," the unidentified station responded.

Stephen, feeling even more irritated but trying to be patient, answered, "Unidentified station, perhaps you don't understand that it is illegal for you to use this frequency without a license. But, no harm done. The band is really dead. What's your name and where are you?"

“I am... It is difficult for me to explain my location. I am not sure which procedure to use. Can you explain what details you want regarding my location?”

“Sure, just give me your state and city, or if you are outside of the U.S. give me your country. Also, what is your name?” Stephen hoped this was enough to get past their present impasse.

“I am not in a city, state, or country. My name is... Explorer.”

“OK, Explorer. That’s pretty cryptic. How about this... are you in the U.S.?”

“I don’t think I am in the U-S. Is that the name of your planet?”

“What do you mean about U.S. being the name of my planet? I’m in the United States. Actually in Phoenix, Arizona. Now please just tell me where you are. I’m not going to turn you in to anyone. I’d just like to know where to point my antenna to get the best signal.”

“I think I understand. I have done a database search. From your location I am approximately in the direction of the constellation Orion at a range of about six hundred thousand kilometers.”

“You’re trying to tell me you are in space?”

“Yes. As I said, I am a visitor and am just passing through. I just wanted to see if contact was possible.”

Stephen was stumped. Could this be for real? He found that hard to believe. However, he did remember that Orion was on the eastern horizon so he swung his antenna around in that direction. On the next transmission he would see if the signal was stronger. “OK, I’ll go along with this for the moment, Explorer. Where are you from?”

“I find this hard to answer. I do not know what you would call my launch point. I have been traveling from there a very long time. I believe you measure time in terms of the orbital time of your planet. I understand that you call one full orbit a year. If so, I have been away from my launch point approximately four hundred, seventy two thousand, nine hundred twenty six point one five years.”

Stephen now took notice that the signal was indeed significantly stronger with his antenna pointed east and he also noticed that there was always at least a five second gap before Explorer responded to a transmission. This would make sense for a station located over 600,000 kilometers away. If this was a practical joke, it was a good one. “Explorer, are you trying to tell me you are about a half million years old?”

“That would be essentially correct. Why do you ask?”

“Come on now, Explorer, you want me to buy that you’ve been alive a half million years?”

“By alive, if you mean activated, that would be correct. If you mean alive as an organic life form, that would not be correct. I am not an organic life form. I am a machine. I was created to explore the galaxy and report my findings back to my launch point. I have been doing that for this entire period and will continue to do so until I cease functioning.”

Stephen noted that he found it necessary to retune his receiver slightly lower in frequency every few seconds. Could it really be the Doppler effect of a spacecraft on a tangential approach? Explorer’s voice did have a mechanical quality to it. “Explorer, when will your closest point of approach to this planet occur?”

“My closest point of approach should occur within the next few transmissions.”

If this guy was a joker he was a good one, Stephen thought. “Explorer, why would you spend so much time traveling the galaxy and reporting back to your launch point? Does anyone there still care what you are reporting?”

“I was sent out as a scout. The creators found that it would be necessary to evacuate their home world. Their sun was becoming unstable and was predicted to go nova within a few thousand years. It has subsequently done so. Only those who evacuated remained alive. They exist in a fleet of transport ships and are seeking a new home world that will be suitable for them. The transport ships were multigenerational ships. None of those who left the home world are still alive. Their descendants are still searching for a home, and I am their advance scout.”

Stephen noted that the downward frequency slide had stopped. “Explorer, you mean there are a whole fleet of aliens following along behind you?”

“Essentially that is correct. They do not follow right behind me though. I take a zigzag course so that I can visit many star systems. The fleet does not exactly follow my path. They only enter a system if my reports are particularly favorable in regard to meeting their requirements for a home world.”

The frequency of the transmission had begun falling yet again. “Explorer, what kind of report have you made about our system?” Stephen wondered if the creators might be paying a visit any time soon. That is, if this wasn’t really just some big practical joke.

“I have not made my report yet. I had doubts about this system’s ability to support sentient life. Then I picked up various coherent electromagnetic emissions from your planet. This surprised me. That’s when I pointed my entire antenna array in your direction and began collecting data. What I have received has been most informative.”

“I’ll bet. So what did you think of the ‘I Love Lucy’ reruns?” Then, thinking better of his comment, “No. Forget that.” Stephen was beginning to believe this might be for real. The apparent Doppler shift of the transmission was once again moving downward more rapidly. If this was a hoax, it was a darned clever one. “Explorer, will you be making your report soon?”

“WB4XYZ Steve, yes I will be making my report soon. I believe you and I will lose contact before I am ready to do so. Why do you ask?”

“Explorer, I was just wondering what you will be reporting about us, and if there is any possibility that the transport ships will be coming near us?”

“I will be summarizing the information I have recorded from the various electromagnetic transmissions from your planet, and will provide them information regarding the environmental conditions for the various planets in this star system. However, I do not believe the transport ships will be coming near to your planet?”

“I am sorry to hear that. I was hoping there might be a chance for contact with them. Wouldn’t they be interested in contacting others as they are traveling?”

“They will be passing this star system at a range of over two light years. They will not likely alter their course. None of the planets in your system are suitable for further exploration. They do not meet minimum habitation requirements. There are other considerations as well.”

“What do you mean by other considerations?”

“In our travels we have contacted other sentient life forms. A number of them have interstellar travel capability. We have been in touch with several of these before reaching this region. They have told us much about this place.”

“What do you mean? What did they tell you that would have any bearing on paying us a visit?”

“I am not sure that it would be wise of me to discuss this.”

“Explorer, you are a long way away and the transport ships are going to be light years away. So, why not tell me whatever it was you were told?”

Following a longer than usual pause, “WB4XYZ Steve, I hesitate to tell you why we won’t be visiting more closely. However, I now understand that you have no idea about any of this. That doesn’t seem fair. I realize it is through no fault of your own that you live where you do. You see, most parts of space that we have been traveling through are not like this region. Many areas are more heavily populated and are even involved in interstellar commerce. In fact, our transport ships have not stopped in a number of places simply because the planets that met our requirements were not uninhabited. In all cases we inquire of those we meet about the regions we are heading into. A number of them have told us about this region.”

“What do you mean they told you about this region?” Stephen noted that the signal was no longer slipping lower in frequency but was dropping in signal strength steadily.

As the signal from Explorer was now just barely audible, Stephen heard the final transmission. “WB4XYZ Steve, I mean no offense, but my creators who are following in the transport ships do not want to live in the slums.”