

Douglas Vakoch, Ph.D.

President of METI—Messaging Extraterrestrial Intelligence, disrupting conventional science as “The Man Who Speaks for Earth.”

Please contact a GDA agent for information.

Topics

- Communication
- Disruption
- Environmental Issues / Climate Change
- Mindfulness
- Science
- Space Exploration
- Sustainability

About Douglas Vakoch, Ph.D.

As a scientist searching for life in the universe and working to preserve civilization on Planet Earth, Dr. Douglas Vakoch travels between the inner space of the psyche and the outer space of the cosmos. As a leading researcher in both astrobiology and psychology, he provides unique insights into the human significance of the age-old question, “Are we alone?”

Disruption requires the courage to take risks. Drawing on his expertise as a leader, scientist, and psychologist, Dr. Vakoch shows how we can foster a mindset and work environment that lead to technological innovation. After sixteen years as part of Silicon Valley’s SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence), he broke away to create METI, the disruptive scientific organization whose namesake activity is Messaging Extraterrestrial Intelligence—the controversial project that sends powerful, intentional radio signals to nearby stars, in the hope of provoking a response. *The New Yorker* magazine calls him “The Man Who Speaks for Earth.” In 2017 he led METI’s radio transmission to a nearby star from the European Incoherent Scatter Scientific Association (EISCAT) antenna in Tromsø, Norway, and he eagerly awaits 2042—the first year that humanity could receive a reply.

To sustain interstellar messaging projects across the generations, Dr. Vakoch explores the human dimensions of global warming and other threats to the long-term survival of civilizations, showing we can embrace both exploration and human welfare at the same time. He emphasizes the vital importance of engaging with nature—amid our hectic urban lifestyles—to secure a greater sense of serenity and fulfillment. He is the general editor of the book series *Ecocritical Theory and Practice*, which has published over sixty books exploring ways that fiction can help us address today’s most critical environmental problems. As a licensed clinical psychologist, Dr. Vakoch draws on lessons from astronauts for dealing with stress down here on Earth.

With graduate degrees in both history and philosophy of science and in psychology, for twelve years Dr. Vakoch taught the next generation of psychotherapists in the clinical psychology doctoral program at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS). He is now professor emeritus at CIIS, as well as CEO of Green Psychotherapy, PC, a psychological practice in Northern California, with offices in Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco.

Dr. Vakoch is an elected member of the International Astronomical Union and the International Institute for Space Law, and he received the Leonardo da Vinci Space Art Award “for dedication to the language and codes for broader cosmic reception and communication and their broader cultural meanings.” He has edited fifteen books with such diverse titles as *Communication with Extraterrestrial Intelligence* (SUNY Press), *The Drake Equation: Estimating the Prevalence of Extraterrestrial Life through the Ages* (Cambridge University Press), *Psychology of Space Exploration* (NASA), and *Ecopsychology, Phenomenology, and the Environment* (Springer). He also serves as editor-in-chief of Springer’s Space and Society book series.

Dr. Vakoch frequently appears in film and television documentaries, where he explores the hunt for life in the cosmos. His expertise includes space exploration, the societal impact of science, and environmental threats to humanity’s long-term survival. His work has been featured in such publications as *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, *Nature*, *Science*, and *WIRED*, and he has been interviewed for numerous radio and television broadcasts on networks ranging from the BBC to the Science Channel, with recent segments on PBS’s “NOVA Wonders” and the History Channel’s “In Search Of” with Zachary Quinto. He was featured in the films *Calling E.T.*, which had its American premiere at SXSW, and *The Visit*, which premiered at Sundance.



Select Keynotes

- **01. Embracing Disruption: Science, Psychology, and Innovation**

The history of scientific progress provides a blueprint for developing disruptive technologies. While much of the day-to-day work of scientists focuses on well-defined puzzles already identified by the broader scientific community, sometimes the standard assumptions that guide a field become obstacles to innovation. Progress requires jettisoning the old framework and tackling obstinate mysteries of the universe from a new angle. Even in the face of startling new revelations about previously unsolved problems, the majority of scientists may be unconvinced or even hostile to new paradigms, perhaps even unable to comprehend alternatives that challenge their traditional methods and conclusions.

Drawing on his own experiences leading the disruptive science of Messaging Extraterrestrial Intelligence (METI), Dr. Vakoch highlights the categories of opposition we can expect both from peers and from the broader public whenever we reformulate old problems and offer new solutions. Disruption elicits fear, and unless we address that fear directly, it can derail the most promising innovations. By embracing the emotional primacy of fear and identifying alternatives that provide engagement and security for individuals and organizations, we can find paths to overcome resistance and to foster transformation.

- **02. Calling the Cosmos: Telling Extraterrestrials We're Here**

For over fifty years, astronomers have used radio telescopes to listen for signals from advanced civilizations. So far, they have found nothing. But what if extraterrestrials are doing the same as us, simply listening and not transmitting? It would be a chillingly silent universe!

In this talk, Dr. Vakoch explains why humanity should take the initiative to make contact by launching an ambitious, ongoing project to transmit powerful, intentional signals to nearby stars, in hope of a reply. Countering concerns that it's dangerous to reveal ourselves to malevolent aliens, he argues for facing our fears of the unknown and acting without the guarantee of success. In the process, we will learn critical lessons in audacity that will transform our everyday lives. By focusing on what we can offer to extraterrestrials and to future generations of humans, we will demonstrate that we are ready to move beyond our technological adolescence and begin growing up in the universe as a civilization and a species.

- **03. From the Big Bang to Us: Seven Steps to a Sustainable Civilization**

Over thirteen billion years ago, the universe exploded into existence, eventually yielding a species capable of reflecting on its own origins and destiny. In this whirlwind tour of the history of the cosmos, Dr. Vakoch unpacks the seven milestones needed for our modern-day human civilization to arise. From the birth of stars to the advent of writing, humankind evolved into the only species on Earth capable of communicating with our counterparts on distant exoplanets. Drawing parallels between the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) and the age-old quest to understand our place in the universe, Dr. Vakoch explores the seven variables of the Drake Equation, used to estimate how many technological civilizations exist in the Milky Way galaxy. From the violent history of the first seconds following the Big Bang, to the contemporary conflicts between warring nations here on Earth, Dr. Vakoch shows how the survival of the fittest has given rise to our remarkable intelligence, while also threatening our very future as a species. To succeed, we'll need to reinvent who are, finally deserving of the name *Homo sapiens*—the wise human.

- **04. Aesthetics for Aliens: Art, Music, and Extraterrestrials**

Do aliens have a sense of beauty? Could they understand ours? From Johannes Kepler's Music of the Spheres to Hollywood's alien symphony in Close Encounters of the Third Kind, we have pondered the link between the cosmos and creativity. Today scientists leading the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) point their telescopes toward the stars, seeking evidence of civilizations beyond Earth. If they find a signal from aliens, what should we say in reply? How could we let them know what it's like to be human? Building on the language of mathematics and science, Dr. Vakoch shows how we might start telling extraterrestrials about aesthetics on Earth.

- **05. Morality and the Fabric of the Universe**

Are evolution and ethics unique to Earth, or are they built into the very structure of the cosmos? Does human morality provide a common ground for encountering life beyond Earth, or is it an instinct that is specific to our particular biology and history? In this talk, Dr. Vakoch explores a basic assumption of the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI): that aliens will be transmitting messages to us for our benefit. This question of whether extraterrestrials will be altruistic has become increasingly important in recent years with the launch of new projects to send powerful radio signals from Earth, in an effort to make first contact.

Technological civilizations that transmit signals for the benefit of others, but with no immediate gain for themselves, certainly seem to be altruistic. But does this make biological sense? Should we expect altruism to evolve throughout the cosmos, or is this only wishful thinking? Is it dangerous to send messages to other worlds, as Stephen Hawking has suggested, or might humankind benefit from an exchange with intelligence elsewhere in the galaxy? Would extraterrestrial societies be based on different ethical principles, or would we see commonalities with Earthly notions of morality? Dr. Vakoch explores topics ranging from game theories of cooperation to the biology of self-sacrifice, providing new insights into our place in the universe and our responsibilities toward other civilizations.

- **06. Are We Alone? Commitment and the Search for Life Beyond Earth**

Over the past quarter of a century, astronomers have discovered that virtually all stars are orbited by exoplanets. We now know the basic building blocks of life are strewn throughout the galaxy. But we have not yet discovered any concrete evidence of life elsewhere in the universe.

We find ourselves in the midst of a three-way horse race to find E.T., and our success depends on our technologies and our human commitment to the search.

In this talk, Dr. Vakoch shows that we humans cannot control whether there is life elsewhere in the universe. Either it's there or it's not. But we have a tremendous capacity to decide whether we will find it, if it's out there. To search for life in the universe, we need to commit to the hard work, expense, and uncertainty of exploration. That's true whether we are looking for radio signals from advanced civilizations, signs of life in the atmospheres of distant exoplanets, or Martian fossils just below the surface of the Red Planet.

The search for extraterrestrial life also provides lessons for all of us as we lead our own lives right here on Earth. Exoplanet hunters needed to believe that planets might orbit other stars before they could discover these exoplanets. If we are to have any chance of finding life beyond Earth, we also need to be willing to search for it, even though we don't know yet whether it exists.

Similarly, we encounter realities in our everyday lives that we cannot control. But we can commit to doing all within our power to understand the way things are. Once we have a better understanding of reality as it currently exists, we can then decide how to create the world that we truly want.

- **07. Stressed out of This World: Lessons from Astronauts in Coping with Major Catastrophes and Daily Hassles**

Stress and conflict are part of our everyday lives. But imagine you had to deal with the pressures of overwhelming work demands and tense relationships in the hazardous environment of outer space. In this talk, Dr. Vakoch draws on the lessons learned from astronauts to provide insights into how we can all lead more contented and successful lives back here on Earth.

Dr. Vakoch uncovers secrets used by astronauts to cope with living in cramped spaces, far from friends and family back on Earth, and he explores preparations to help astronauts deal with future missions to the Moon and Mars that will be even more challenging. The practical wisdom and guidance we gain from these intrepid spacefarers helps us all deal more effectively with stresses ranging from daily hassles to major catastrophes that inevitably happen to all of us over the course of our lives.

- **08. Green Tranquility: Staying Sane through Moments in Nature**

As we feel overwhelmed by the pressures of work, constantly slaves to the digital technologies that are supposed to make our lives better, we need a break. We feel exhausted, overburdened, with no way to escape. We might occasionally get a brief respite as we spend a weekend hiking in the mountains, but how can we bring that sense of renewal back into our daily lives?

In this talk, Dr. Vakoch will provide practical guidelines for reclaiming nature in urban environments, starting with a one-minute experiential exercise that audience members can try during the talk itself. Drawing on ecotherapy and mindfulness meditation practices, he shows how connecting with elements of nature that already surround us can increase our sense of peace and serenity, wherever we live.

- **09. Climate Changes: Facing Reality through Fiction**

Though we are constantly bombarded with warnings about global warming, we easily become overwhelmed, feeling at a loss to do anything as individuals. The best way to face the reality of global warming is through fiction. Climate fiction, or "cli-fi," is a literary genre that examines the human destruction of our natural environment, providing cautionary tales of future cataclysm if we don't change course. By confronting our greatest fears directly and examining antidotes to our current practices and mindsets, cli-fi also provides a vision for a sustainable future, helping us imagine—and create—a better path forward.

- **10. The Power of Listening**

Simply listening to others, without judging, can be transformative. We don't always need to offer people solutions to their problems. Sometimes, just listening is enough. Drawing on his diverse experiences as a psychotherapist and a scientist searching for radio signals from civilizations in space, Dr. Vakoch explains the virtues of patience and shifting the focus away from ourselves.

The key to effective listening is understanding people from their own perspective, not ours. Simply seeing others as they see themselves, listening in a nonjudgmental way, helps people accept themselves and move toward greater authenticity. Rather than pitting our view against theirs, by committing to hear others in their own terms, and in their own time, we can create a space to overcome longstanding histories of conflict, perhaps even giving others the freedom to agree with us for the first time.

Dr. Vakoch demonstrates how we can also learn to listen to ourselves better. We have all received messages throughout our lives about who we should be and what we should do. Our true desires and dreams can remain hidden even from ourselves, underneath the expectations of others—unless we become open to surprises from within.

Select Book Titles

- **2018:** Literature and Ecofeminism: Intersectional and International Voices
- **2017:** Ecofeminism in Dialogue
- **2017:** Women and Nature?: Beyond Dualism in Gender, Body, and Environment
- **2015:** The Drake Equation: Estimating the Prevalence of Extraterrestrial Life Through the Ages

- **2014:** Archaeology, Anthropology, and Interstellar Communication
- **2014:** Extraterrestrial Altruism: Evolution and Ethics in the Cosmos
- **2014:** Ecopsychology, Phenomenology, and the Environment: The Experience of Nature
- **2013:** Altruism in Cross-Cultural Perspective
- **2013:** Astrobiology, History, and Society: Life Beyond Earth and the Impact of Discovery
- **2013:** On Orbit and Beyond: Psychological Perspectives on Human Spaceflight
- **2012:** Feminist Ecocriticism: Environment, Women, and Literature
- **2011:** Communication with Extraterrestrial Intelligence (CETI)
- **2011:** Ecofeminism and Rhetoric: Critical Perspectives on Sex, Technology, and Discourse
- **2011:** Psychology of Space Exploration: Contemporary Research in Historical Perspective
- **2011:** Civilizations Beyond Earth: Extraterrestrial Life and Society

Select Articles

- [WIRED, "Meet the Guy Who Left the SETI Institute to Talk to Aliens"](#)
- [Nature Physics, "In Defence of METI"](#)
- [BBC's Word of Mouth, "Is Anyone Listening to Us?"](#)
- [The New York Times, "Scientist at Work: Douglas Vakoch; When It's Not Enough to Say 'Take Me to Your Leader'"](#)
- [The New Yorker, "The Man Who Speaks for Earth"](#)
- [San Francisco Chronicle, "In Search of ET: Fear of What's out There Causes Big Split among Space Scientists"](#)
- [The Economist, "How to Send a Message to Another Planet"](#)
- [British Psychological Society's The Psychologist, "Interview: What Would You Say to an Alien?"](#)
- [American Psychological Association's Monitor on Psychology, "Hello? Anyone out There?"](#)

Select Testimonials

I write to provide enthusiastic testimony of Doug Vakoch's public speaking. I engaged Doug to offer a lecture as part of our programming for Starstruck: The Fine Art of Astrophotography, one of our most popular exhibitions ever. Doug gave a lecture titled "Aesthetics for Aliens: Art, Music, and Extraterrestrials." It touched on—at a minimum—history, mathematics, biology, astronomy, anthropology, art history, philosophy, and music, and engaged our audience in some of the most interesting and difficult questions facing humankind. After the talk and a lively Q&A session, the audience left having had their imaginations ignited. Doug Vakoch is an articulate, charming, and funny speaker with a knowledge of SETI and related endeavors that runs both wide and deep. I heartily commend him to you without hesitation.

— *Anthony Shostak, Education Curator, Museum of Art, Bates College*

If I were to distill my impression of Dr. Vakoch as a public speaker, I would contend that he is a compelling storyteller, capable of catalyzing the imagination of an audience, while conveying scientific depth through critical thinking utterly without the ponderous authority so often encountered in experts. To be more specific, he is a genuine public intellectual—a scientist-philosopher of the first order. And in a single word, he is enchanting.

— *Jeffrey A. Lockwood, Professor of Natural Sciences & Humanities, University of Wyoming*

Doug's contributions are always superb and captivating. His subject is compelling, yes. But along with that he brings his deep philosophical thinking about the implications that an encounter with intelligence from elsewhere might encompass. This is paired with scientific acumen and masterful storytelling ability. Doug can take an audience "where they've never gone before" and if that reference seems lighthearted it is sincere because your audience will find that these ideas are not the stuff of fiction. Indeed, a few hours in conversation with Doug will change the way you think about life, the complexities of otherness, aggression, and the evolution of societies. Thinking about aliens with Dr. Doug Vakoch brings you right back to our human condition. My audiences always stay for every word. I highly recommend the experience for you and your audiences.

— *Melissa Alexander, Director of Public Programs, The Exploratorium*

