

Charles Sichenzio

Dr. Baird

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The Ultimate Rhetorical Situation: Voyager's Golden Message

I never thought space exploration would teach me about writing. Yet here I am, reflecting on a gold disc strapped to a spaceship that's now 14 billion miles away, and somehow, it feels closer to my everyday life than half the books I've read. The Voyager Golden Record isn't just a scientific artifact; it's a masterclass in rhetorical genius. It's a message meant for no one, and everyone. The ultimate "what if?" written for an audience that might never exist, but still had to be taken seriously. That's what makes it so captivating.

Carl Sagan didn't just send a record into space; he launched a rhetorical time capsule, crafted for an alien audience that may not even understand time, let alone Bach. Imagine that—having to write a message without knowing your reader's language, senses, beliefs, or biology. That's a rhetorical situation dialed up to a cosmic level. The stakes? Representing all of humanity. The constraints? Literally everything we don't know. Yet that's what makes it powerful: the challenge forced clarity, empathy, and creativity to rise above uncertainty.

The Burkean parlor analogy stuck with me. Just like we walk into conversations in academia or life mid-stream, Sagan entered a cosmic parlor, aware he'd never hear the reply. Still, he added something meaningful. That's what rhetoric is: joining the conversation, even when you're fashionably 40,000 years early.

When I listened to the "hello" from the children of Earth, especially Sagan's own son, I didn't just hear a voice. I heard a hope. That one simple greeting hit me harder than a thousand political speeches. It was pure ethos: innocent, universal, disarming. It made me think of Law 12 from *The 48 Laws of Power*: "Use Selective Honesty and Generosity to Disarm." Sagan didn't just pick songs and sounds randomly. Every detail, from brainwaves of love, to the map of our place in space—was a rhetorical move, planned with intentionality. The message was not just "we exist," but "we're worth knowing."

It reminded me of what Jacobson, Pawlowski, and Tardy said in *Make Your Move*. Every genre comes with its own set of rhetorical expectations. The Golden Record is a genre unto itself: part mixtape, part museum, part diplomatic letter. It speaks across time, species, and logic systems. And still it works, because it's built on a foundation of universal appeals: music, emotion, math, and imagery. Those are moves any intelligent being, Earthling or otherwise, might understand.

Looking at it from a personal lens, this record taught me how to approach writing when you can't predict your audience. Just like Greene's laws taught me how to wield words tactically, the Golden Record taught me how to wield them ethically. It's not always about persuasion, it's sometimes about representation. The creators didn't craft it for debate or defense. They created it to speak for a species, to introduce us with grace and humility. It's the rhetorical equivalent of a handshake across galaxies.

"In Praise of the Telescopic Perspective" drove the point home. We often zoom in too close, fighting culture wars, political battles, or petty rivalries. But the telescopic view pulls back. It makes you see the Earth not as nations or tribes, but as a blue speck suspended in darkness. That's the perspective Sagan wanted. That's the mindset we need more of.

I found myself asking: What if we wrote everything that way? What if we imagined our audience not as someone next to us, but someone vastly different, someone alien in every sense, yet still worthy of understanding? Would our writing be more thoughtful? More universal? I think so.

In the end, this assignment wasn't just about understanding rhetoric. It was about understanding ourselves. The Golden Record isn't about aliens. It's about us—who we are when no one's watching, what we choose to say when the chances of being heard are slim to none.

This genre of literacy elevated my thinking. It merged science, art, and philosophy into a message written with courage and clarity. Like Greene, Sagan understood the power of words, but while Greene's were designed to dominate, Sagan's were designed to connect. And that's the lesson I'm taking with me: that literacy, at its core, isn't just power, it's presence. A way of saying, "We were here. And we mattered."