

## In Pursuit of the Path of Totality August 21 2017

Does anyone have plans for August 21, 2017? Between 10 and 11.30 am, Pacific Standard Time? Yes? No? Hundreds of thousands of people from around the world will be primed, pumped, and ready at that time on that day – including one of our physics professors who will be taking a group of our students on a road trip to the middle of Oregon and I'll be driving to the middle of Idaho – all of us in pursuit of the path of totality, that is to say, we'll be going to witness the total eclipse of the sun.

Which is what, exactly? A total solar eclipse occurs when the Earth, Moon, and Sun are lined up perfectly, and the Moon blocks the Sun completely, treating us to an awesome lightshow if you are *in the path* of totality which is only 50 miles wide. This year the eclipse will hit landfall on the Pacific Coast near Salem, Oregon and pass close to Idaho Falls, the southern tip of Wyoming, on down into St. Louis, Nashville, and exit from Charleston, South Carolina into the Atlantic – allowing almost every person in the continental 48 United States to reach totality within a day's drive. With no cloud cover (hence Idaho a better bet than Oregon), we will look west and see the shadow of the moon rushing towards us, and when it is close, putting on our special sunglasses so we can look directly at the sun, the air will turn cold, the birds will stop chirping, and then, because the sun is now completely blocked, we will be able to take off our glasses and stare directly at the sun and see its corona, its atmosphere glowing in a circle, and then in a manner of seconds – 120 at most -- the moon will move east, the sun will start to shine and hoots and hollerings will be heard all along the path of totality.

So what is my point? Why bring up cosmic matters when we are so focused on this earthly occasion?

First: you ought to go! The last time a total eclipse happened, exclusively coursing its way across the United States was in the year 436! And the next time it will happen will be 2316. And for the next 10 years there won't be any place on earth where it will be good viewing. So pack up the car, take some friends and a couple of days off, and hit the road. No better time than now!

Second: to remind ourselves that from a cosmological perspective we have far more in common as human beings than we have differences, as profound and as sweet as those differences are. And that the most awesome moments in our lives – a wedding, the birth of a child, the death of a parent -- are just that – brief moments out of, what I trust will be for you, graduates of 2017, a long life. Don't waste your time. Cherish those moments. And if you must, set up the video camera so it films on its own. Watch the eclipse with your own eyes. The revolution will not be

televised. Go forth proudly as Pacificans – joined forever by the time you have spent here.