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News that Inspires

An Astronaut's Life-Changing Lesson from a Moment in Orbit
by Richard Schiffman

One of my great thrills in recent years was having dinner with astronaut Edgar Mitchell. Mr. Mitchell was the lunar module pilot on Apollo 14 in 1971, during which he spent nine hours taking samples and conducting a variety of experiments on the surface of the moon.

As a journalist, I have met plenty of celebrities, but sitting across the table from this soft-spoken astronaut was different. It wasn't his fame that gave me goose bumps, but the fact that I was face to face with one of only a handful of humans who had actually left Earth behind and walked upon another world. For months after that, I could not look up at the moon without thinking, "I just met someone who was there!"

During the return journey of Apollo 14, Mitchell had an experience that would change the course of his life. In an interview with Ascent Magazine, he recalled:

"The spacecraft was rotating to maintain the thermal balance of the Sun.... [E]very two minutes, with every rotation, we saw the Earth, the Moon, and the Sun as they passed by the window. The 360-degree panorama of the heavens was awesome and the stars are ten times as bright and, therefore, ten times as numerous than you could ever see on a high mountaintop on a clear night.

"It was overwhelmingly magnificent.... I realized that the molecules of my body and the molecules of the spacecraft had been manufactured in an ancient generation of stars. It wasn't just intellectual knowledge -- it was a subjective visceral experience accompanied by ecstasy -- a transformational experience."

Edgar Mitchell was raised a Southern Baptist. He knew of nothing in Christianity or in science that could account for his mystical epiphany in space. But he stumbled upon a description of it in an ancient Sanskrit text, which spoke of savikalpa samadhi, an experience in which objects lose their separateness and are perceived ecstatically as being elements in a vast and borderless oneness.

The astronaut was a hard-nosed scientist who had been trained as an aeronautical engineer and a test pilot. His experience on the way home to Earth, however, was a game changer. It inspired him to set up in 1973 the Institute of Noetic Sciences, a nonprofit charged with investigating a whole range of psychic and spiritual phenomena, and the nature of human consciousness.

I couldn't help but think about Mitchell as I walked through "Beyond Planet Earth: The Future of Space Exploration," a new exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, which marks the 50th anniversary of human spaceflight.

If the astronaut is right, space travel may offer more than just scientific knowledge of other worlds; it may provide us with a unique spiritual perspective on our place in the cosmic scheme of things. It may play a vital role in the expansion of human consciousness beyond its parochial boundaries. But the question is: Are we ready to leave our racial and national rivalries behind and see ourselves as citizens of the universe?

During dinner with Mitchell, he spoke of the timeless human urge to explore, to move into new places both physically and figuratively, and to enlarge our sense of awe and imagination of human possibilities. Space travel has rightly been regarded as one of the great technological achievements of our times. But is it more than this?

I was hoping that the show at the Museum of Natural History would address these larger spiritual and philosophical questions. But the exhibition, sponsored by the aerospace firm Lockheed Martin, focuses narrowly on the technical challenges of the space program and the new generation of hardware that is being developed to meet them.

Museum visitors walk through the scaled down mock-up of a proposed base at Shackleton Crater near the moon's south pole; past the model of a space elevator, whose cable would stretch 28,000 miles from the lunar surface; then on to a full-scale replica of the Mars Science Laboratory Rover, which is scheduled to land on the red planet this August.

Much has changed since the heady early days of spaceflight, when, fueled by cold-war rivalries, the United States and the Soviet Union spared no expense to send the first astronauts into orbit and eventually to the moon. The last manned mission to the moon was in 1972. Since then, NASA has focused on the space shuttle program and sending unmanned robotic probes to the planets, as well as the Hubble Space Telescope, which has transmitted never-before-seen images of the far reaches of the universe.

Is space travel a pointless luxury or a psychic necessity? How will venturing still farther into space change our view of ourselves? Are we ready to do so? I wish the museum show had explored these questions. But since it didn't, we'll end with the visionary words of Mitchell from an interview with The Examiner:

"[W]e will go to Mars, in due course, and back to the Moon, in due course. When we do that it's going to sound a little foolish when we say, 'I came from the United States, Canada, or Britain, or Germany, or Israel, or Russia.'

"No, we came from the Earth and we haven't got our act together yet because we're still too busy killing each other over whose god is the best god. We are not learning to view ourselves as an advanced, evolving civilization. That is what we really must learn to do ... if we [are] to survive."