

Science News

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Incorporating Science News Letter

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COVER: Five years ago, the first man on the moon, Neil Armstrong, took this picture of the second man on the moon, Buzz Aldrin. Space sciences editor Jonathan Eberhart, who has covered man and space almost since they first met, gives his thoughts on this page about what the event really meant, and why, if it had not happened yesterday, it would have happened tomorrow.

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July 27, 1974

SPEAKING PERSONALLY

Okay, readers, this is it. I've been covering the Space Age for years without ever having had a chance to say why, or even to say that I care enough to want to say why. Now, thanks to the fact that the five years since human beings first set foot on another world is a relatively round number, I have at unspeakably long last been granted a chance to write:

Confessions of a Space Freak

Watching the projection-TV screen at the then Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston as Neil Armstrong fumbled his way down the lunar module ladder and put his foot on the moon was surely the experience of my life. I'm writing this, in fact, because I believe that it was the experience of *man's* life. It was certainly bigger than NASA, and hero-astronauts, and America. And yet, in a way it was a non-event: It was inevitable. It had to happen.

Just as surely as slimy things crawled out of the ooze to become human beings, it was absolutely, unavoidably certain that those humans would keep climbing past their inalterably finite planet. They won't stop with the moon—you can study it to death, but who wants it? They'll go to other planets, other moons, and I simply cannot imagine that, short of some fundamental, species-wide change or the sun going nova, they won't go to other planetary systems around other stars.

It won't be because I wrote about it, and it won't be because National Priorities have changed, and it won't, fundamentally, even be because sometime way down the pike Dr. X discovers the miracle warp-drive that makes it all quick, cheap and easy. It will be because, well, because it's inevitable. There is no way it can't happen. (Come on, theologians, or somebody, give me a hand—I'm just a fumbling existentialist trying to describe a non-existential truth.) It's the species. It's the nature of man. Maybe you don't think you want to cash in your condominium and go to Rigel XII, but in some metaphysical, race-memory way, you do.

Okay, if it doesn't matter whether or not I inspire some future space cadet with my deathless prose, why am I doing it? I'll tell you why. I have to. It's catharsis, a turn-on, a free trip to the shrink. As a kid I never wanted to be a cowboy or a fireman or any of that classic Norman Rockwell stuff. I just wanted to experience what is out there in space—can you imagine a six-year-old boy trying to project what it must be like to have his stomach in his mouth from weightlessness? Or to wander around with compressed methane maybe two inches away on the other side of his faceplate? In 1967, when I was 25, I was at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena when Mariner 5 flew by Venus, and a scientist observed that the atmospheric pressure there was so great that, assuming your eyes could see at the right wavelengths in the first place, the light would be bent completely around the planet and you could see the back of your head. As a science writer I had to evaluate, skepticize and check out the possibility with other sources. As Jonathan Eberhart I stayed awake all night trying to imagine it.

It's a fortuitous convenience for my head that my theory of the inevitability of it all doesn't depend on you individually giving a damn. There are admittedly all sorts of realities that get in the way. Budgets, priorities, guns-and-butter, all that jazz. Well I—Jonathan, not the science writer—don't want to hear about them (the science writer handles that part). God knows it costs too much. Twenty billion dollars and a boxtop is certainly a big deal for going to the moon, even for a card-carrying space cadet. The thing that turns me on is that I was alive to see it happen. Not only that, I was as close to the action as I could be without helping Neil down the steps. Soon there'll be the space shuttle—still more bucks out the window, if you care, which I don't. And there's a chance, just a chance, that I might be able to fly in it. In *orbit*, for crying out loud. I can barely handle that one. It just boggles my mind.

What do you think? Is the whole notion outrageous? Have I shot down my credibility for all time? I wish you'd let me know. I can't promise to answer every last letter that comes over the transom, but I'd love to hear from a student, an astrophysicist, another writer, a layman (whatever that is), an astronaut, even James Fletcher, who gets to run the whole of NASA but who is socked with realities 50 times a day. On the other hand, even if you don't write, that's cool too. It'll happen anyway. Apollo 11 was just the beginning. And you were there.

—Jonathan Eberhart