

Pale Blue Dot

Probably the most famous photograph of the last fifty years is the one snapped by Apollo 17. You know the one I mean. Most of the coast of Africa is visible along with the Arabian peninsula. Near the top of the picture sunlight plays across the Sahara and at the bottom, clouds swirl around the polar ice of Antarctica. No other image has made us more aware of our common destiny as inhabitants of one planet.

Astronauts who've traveled to the lunar surface have often described the view in profoundly mystical terms, like Edgar Mitchell. "Suddenly from behind the rim of the moon," he says, "in long, slow-motion moments of immense majesty, there emerges a sparkling blue and white jewel, a light, delicate sky-blue sphere laced with slowly swirling veils of white, rising gradually like a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery. It takes more than a moment to fully realize that this is earth—home."

On the return trip, gazing through 240,000 miles of space toward the stars and the planet from which I had come, I suddenly experienced the universe as intelligent, loving, harmonious."

From that vantage, he says he not only knew intellectually but also viscerally that "the molecules of my body and this spacecraft, of the world I had come from and was now returning to, were all manufactured in the furnace of an ancient generation of stars like those surrounding us. Our presence here was not an accident of nature, but rather an extension of the same universal process that evolved our molecules. And I felt an extraordinary personal connectedness with it. I experienced an ecstasy of unity. I not only saw the connectedness, I *felt* it." The thirty years since, he says, have been "an account of being hit on the head with astonishing experiences" that forever changed his understanding of who he was and how he related to the larger scheme of things. Maybe I was hit on the head, too, when I watched Neil Armstrong step out of the lunar lander back in 1969. I know I was tuned in, like 600 million other people around the globe, but my recollections of the event have grown hazy. The view of earth from space ought to be an icon, a glimpse of self-transcendence, but has been reproduced so many times on coffee mugs and screen savers that for most of us the excitement and enchantment has long ago worn off. The same technology that enabled us to reach beyond our planet to share in a brief moment of global togetherness has paradoxically left us feeling less connected than ever from the earth or from each other. Having vaulted past the stratosphere to actually see the curvature of the blue horizon has paradoxically made the world more flat. So that when our president announced a while back his administration's goal to return America to the moon during his State of the Union, most listeners responded with a wide-mouthed yawn, united by our boredom rather than by any sense of solidarity as voyagers on Spaceship Earth.

Maybe that's why I reacted warily when my wife told me that Virgin Atlantic Airlines was offering a new travel club for space tourists. Frequent flyers who rack up two million miles in bonus points are now eligible to be hoisted seventy-five miles above sea level into low-earth orbit. Part of me would like to go, and I suspect that some of you might be happy to donate your unused miles to help shoot me into space (one-way, of course!)

But I'm also afraid that I might be disappointed by the flight. Instead of experiencing the raptures of cosmic consciousness like Edgar Mitchell I'd probably end up air sick or wishing I could trade my seat in coach class. Travel often ends up being better in the guide books, where it's always breathtakingly picturesque, than in the actual getting there, where the anti-gravity toilets are usually out-of-order.

I have some experience with travel to exotic locations. As a sophomore in college, I spent the better part of a year hitchhiking and wandering around the world. Dimly, I was on a spiritual quest. And without having any definite itinerary or quite knowing what I was looking for, I headed to the orient: to Istanbul, Afghanistan and across the Khyber Pass, on to Amritsar, the holy city of the Sikhs and Dharmasala where the Dalai Lama resided, and finally to Benares, or Varanasi as its called, where the Ganges flows. I hadn't the foggiest idea what I was looking at. At age nineteen, I was simply trying to get as far away from home as possible. I wanted to experience the Other: not the white suburban middle-class Americanized culture I was accustomed to, and which had at that juncture left me feeling religiously at loose ends about the reasons for my existence and purpose in the world. If there was an answer waiting for me somewhere, I sensed it had to be somewhere faraway, remote, esoteric, maybe in Samarkand or the lost cities of the Silk Road where an older, more mysterious rhythm played. The moment of awakening came for me in the foothills of the Himalayas, high in the Punjab, as walking up the mountain in search of illumination I encountered three young Nepalese coming down, all about my own age, smoking weed, listening to transistor radios with portable earphones, and wearing the most absurd Bavarian climber's hats with little feathers sticking out, straight from the *Sound of Music*. They were headed West while I was headed East. And without articulating it or reflecting too much, I suppose I realized then I'd traveled twelve thousand miles, as far as I could flee, but that Western culture including TV, Kentucky Fried, and Disney had penetrated the far corners of the planet and that if there was any enlightenment waiting at the end of the rainbow I was just as likely to find it back home as in the land of 20,000 foot peaks and fluttering prayer flags. Within a short time, I was on a plane back from being a tourist New Delhi to a job in Dumas, Texas.

I'm not sure whether I want to go back to India. I'd like to see it again with more mature eyes. But I'm less interested in passing through Heathrow, filled with the hordes who are seeking their two million bonus miles, each of whom will each need to circle the earth eighty times to rack up the total. Part of me would like to go to Stonehenge and Salisbury and Chartres, all the continents where I've never been to see the holy sites. UNESCO lists over 800 World Heritage Centers, some of them natural marvels like Yosemite and the Grand Canyon, others shrines to human aspiration like Mesa Verde. Yes, I'd like to experience them all. The Pyramids. Machu Picchu. The caves at Lascaux. But I also know that what made some of these places sacred sites was their very remoteness, their inaccessibility, their removal from the mundane concerns of civilization and participation in a wholly different order of being, older and more elemental. Isn't that what once gave the moon it's mystique, and outer space before it became filled with four million pounds of castaway cast iron? Isn't that what made Mount Everest such a synonym for splendor and transcendence before it became the

world's tallest trash receptacle?

What makes a place holy, I think, is its ability to lift us outside of our ordinary, everyday preoccupations and make us mindful of that larger reality of which we're a part. For ancient, pre-industrial people, these sacred spaces were mostly mountains or other natural features that could evoke a dual sense of our own smallness and insignificance before the immensities of time and space and of our connectedness to something more lasting than our own puny egos. The buildings—mosques and churches and temples—we call holy tend to be very old, so encrusted with centuries they themselves almost become like part of the landscape. But all of these places are being threatened, some of them literally like the great statues of the Buddha at Bamiyan that were blasted to bits by the Taliban, but more of them inadvertently, by people like the two million expected to visit Cambodia's Angkor Wat this year, all of them yearning for fast food and indoor plumbing as they visit this center of the old Khmer empire, creating both traffic and a flood of sewage the temple complex situated in thick jungle is ill-equipped to handle. Rather touchingly and naively, the director of Angkor Wat's Archaeological Park when interviewed recently expressed the hope that if the human race could send a man to the moon, surely we could meet the technical hurdles of saving a crumbling Hindu shrine.

But technical information may not be what's needed to save these holy sites. And being able to send a man to the moon isn't necessarily the best yardstick of the kind of knowledge and humility *Homo sapiens* needs most at this point.

Those were lessons reinforced for me when I read a newspaper account written by Leigh Ann Henson of how she had ascended Australia's Ayer's Rock.

Rising a thousand feet straight up from the flat-as-a-pancake desert, Ayer's is known as Uluru by the aborigines. Native people don't climb the rock, recognizing it as part of the sacred path their ancestors walked when the Earth was originally formed. They ask that visitors also refrain. Only after she'd dragged herself up along the chains affixed to the stone's steep spine and returned to her air-conditioned tour bus did this overeager spiritual tourist reflect on the disrespect of what she'd done.

Ms. Henson writes, "When I think back to that day and the dry heat of the Australian outback, it is a conversation with an Aborigine artist—not the view from a conquered stone—I remember most vividly. The artists, a woman with wild, graying hair, had been dour-faced when I approached her outdoor art booth after my climb. As I ran my hand across canvas surfaces covered in scattered dots that rose like Braille, she called out the prices to let me know she was watching me.

"The one I finally chose to purchase was a small piece of prestretched canvas bearing half-moon shapes surrounded by a blizzard of paint. It was composed of earth tones—hues of mud and saffron.

"What are these shapes?" I asked her, pointing to the crescents, and the woman's face softened at the sincerity of my interest.

“Those represent people sitting around a campfire,” she told me. “Stars are the campfires of our ancestors.” The night before, I’d lain under a Milky Way so thick that I had finally understood how it had gotten its name. Stars seemed to flow through the sky like a liquid vein of white diamonds through an onyx stone. Holding the painting, I considered how comforting it must be to see all those brilliant lights as the warm hearths of loved ones. “You have a lot of stars here,” I told her.

“A lot of campfires,” she corrected me.

Somehow this indigenous woman had inherited and held on to a wisdom passed on for thousands of generations—a wisdom whose source was as close as the sky overhead and the ground beneath her feet, but that our modern astronauts had to travel a quarter million miles to re-learn and remember, that (in the words of Edgar Mitchell) we were all manufactured in the furnace of an ancient generation of stars. They are indeed the fires of our ancestors. “My view of our planet,” Mitchell said after Apollo’s safe return, “was a glimpse of divinity.” But the Australian woman also knew the Earth was divine, and knew it without ever having ridden in an airplane.

It’s that kind of wisdom we need to save our pale blue dot, the tiny warm ember that’s our home.