

Bill Rea ? It'll soon be time to go to Mars

Growing up is not all it's said to be, and I firmly believe there is value in holding on to the dreams and ideals that one had as a kid. It could be argued it's impractical. On the other hand, such thoughts could, in the long-run, turn into the most practical ones some people ever had.

Those who know me know that I have always been a fan of the space program and space exploration. Thus, I was delighted last week when NASA was able to successfully launch its Orion deep space exploration vehicle, getting it some 3,600 miles straight up, and then bringing it back to earth in relatively good shape.

This is being heralded as a prelude to a possible manned voyage to Mars, with the year 2030 being mentioned. I'll mark my 72nd birthday that year, and watching the 21st century successor to Walter Cronkite announced that people are standing on Mars seems mighty appealing to me.

Like any age in history, this one has pros and cons when it comes to living in it. I would have preferred not to have lived during that terrible day of 9-11. And there were certain problems with living in the early 1980s, when it looked like Ronald Reagan and Leonid Brezhnev might actually come to blows, which would have meant a quick introduction to eternity for most of us. There were a lot of people in my circle who were scared that was going to happen, and while I never really believed things would ever go that far, the possibility was always there.

On the other hand, there are some parts of the time into which I was born that have made me feel blessed.

Unlike my parents, I did not have to live through a World War. My father became old enough to 'join up' rather late in the Second World War, entering the Air Force and becoming a navigator and bombardier. He never left the country during the War (he was in line to be sent to the Pacific when the fighting ended), but as a young man hovering around the threshold of 20, he must have wondered what would happen when it came his turn to put his hide on the line.

Unlike most of you reading this, I have actually watched the Toronto Maple Leafs win the Stanley Cup, and actually watched the ensuing ticker-tape parade with my own eyes (if you're curious about the reference to 'ticker-tape,' try Googling).

More to the point, I was privileged to be around to watch the most important moments of the space program in the 1960s and early '70s. That included that wonderful day in July 1969 when my parents and I watched as Cronkite announced that human beings were actually on the moon. I was 11 at the time, and I well remember my mother admonishing me to appreciate the fact that I had been alive to see this incredible moment. I have always appreciated it, and never forgotten it. One of the biggest moments of my professional life came the day I shook hands with Buzz Aldrin, the second man to walk on the moon. An item on my Life's To-Do List was crossed off at that moment.

Yet there are many in our society who are indifferent to space exploration and the accomplishments of Aldrin and so many people like him (bearing in mind the landings on the moon were the result of tremendous efforts of a handful of brave astronauts, backed up by countless talented and dedicated men and women). There was a time when I dismissed such individuals as idiots. I've toned my attitude down a bit since then.

I reflected to the days in my teens, a couple of years after footprints were made on the Lunar surface. I started hearing about a guy named Lindbergh, and how he flew across the Atlantic all by himself. For about the first 11 years of my life, my father made frequent business trips, flying across the Atlantic to Europe and back several times. It took a couple of years and a certain amount of perspective (with which one has to be born and also has to nurture) to really appreciate Lindbergh's accomplishment.

I think the word 'perspective' is very important to this issue.

Space exploration is important to humanity, even if there are a lot of humans who don't seem to get it. It represents advancement in technology and knowledge, but there is so much more involved.

It is true that I have never studied psychology, at least formally. But I have spent the bulk of my adult life watching people, and I think I have developed certain insights into how they think. Humans need to explore space for the same reason they needed to climb Mount Everest - because it's there.

NASA sent men to the moon because it was there (still is), and now it looks like they're setting their efforts toward Mars. And that is really nothing new.

A year ago last spring, we started hearing about an outfit called Mars One, that was recruiting people to set up a human settlement on that famous red planet. Naturally, a lot of research and effort is going to be required to make this thing work. The trip to Mars is going to be complicated, but the trip home is going to be simple, because no such return trip is planned. You sign on for this voyage being offered by Mars One, it's one-way.

Now in fairness, the folks in charge of the program are being completely up front about that.

On the other hand, I get the idea that NASA is proposing to send people to Mars and actually bring them back too. And unlike the Apollo moon missions, I think we can be reasonably confident the planned trips are going to be co-ed.

It's good to hear that interest in exploring space is coming back. I guess it was understandable that there would be something of a lull after several successful trips to the moon and back. And it is true that there was a lot of exploration and experimentation with the Space Shuttle program and the International Space Station. But we already know much of what's in orbit around earth. It's what on and around those other things in space that we should be looking into. It ties right in with one of the basics of human nature ? curiosity.

Men set sail on ships centuries ago and travelled to the other side of the seas. True, they might have thought there could be something of value at the end of the voyages, but I really believe the main reason for these trips is they were just curious. Curiosity is one of the main factors that make up humanity. Without it, nothing in history would have even been ventured, meaning not much would ever have been gained.

It's been more than 40 years since people walked on the moon. It's a pretty big place, so there's still a lot to learn there. I believe basic human curiosity will require more exploration of the lunar surface. And I'm just as positive there will be exploration of Mars too, and I think there's a pretty good chance that I'll live to see it.

There's too much out there for people to ignore for too long, and too much curiosity waiting to be satisfied

