

Bill Rea ? Still there to be explored

Befitting the fact that I was alive, conscious and coming of age in the 1960s, I have always held astronauts in a certain amount of awe.

I realized I haven't lost that last week when Canadian astronaut Jeremy Hansen addressed students at St. John Paul II Elementary School in Bolton.

There was one comment he made, while addressing the kids, that really made me think ? he was born after the Apollo moon missions. He was born in 1976 (I did a bit of Googling and found he was actually born on my late mother's 50th birthday). It drove home to me that there is now a generation of people who have been attracted to the thought of exploring space who missed the ultimate moment that took place in July 1969, when the late Neil Armstrong walked on the moon for the first time. I find that very encouraging.

Having watched the moon landings, along with all the flights that were used to set that remarkable stage, there was a time when I would have been bothered by the apparent indifference some people expressed over space exploration.

I think I have always understood the motivation behind space exploration. It simply is a response to the curiosity that have made human beings what they are. The fact is we have all looked in the night sky and wondered what is up there. Our sun is a star, and there are planets that orbit around it. One of those planets we know supports life.

One of the many interesting points Hansen made to the kids is there are maybe 200 billion stars in the galaxy in which we reside, and perhaps 100 billion galaxies in the universe. Rather frightening numbers, yet they represent something that people are interested in exploring. There are people like Jeremy Hansen around to prove it.

Why explore space? I think part of it is the traditional reason for why people want to climb Mount Everest ? because it's there. But I also think there's more to it than that.

I would love to fly in space, but I have absolutely no desire to climb Everest.

Of course, I spent a lot of time as a kid watching about space exploration on TV, despite the efforts of my parents to prevent it (they had an aversion to their offspring wasting time with ?smellivision?). I watched the legendary coverage provided by Walter Cronkite of all those flights into space, but I had also watched science fiction, from rubbish like *Lost in Space* to ground-breaking stuff like *Star Trek*. I was intrigued by the hopeful stories of the future, which Captain Kirk and company explored what was to come in the future. It provided more hope than what I got from watching what happened ?a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.?

I have met several astronauts, as well as one cosmonaut. I well remember the thrill I felt the day I shook hands with Buzz Aldrin, the second man to walk on the moon.

In an earlier life, when I worked in the megacity to the south in the late 1990s, East York was my main stomping ground, and one of the high schools there had been renamed after Marc Garneau, who was the first Canadian to fly into space. Garneau made frequent appearances at the school (this was before he became a politician), as did a host of other star voyagers. Not surprisingly, the local media was always tipped off when one of these illuminates was going to appear, and being the local editor, I made sure these events were covered.

I never got to meet Garneau. For some strange reason, his appearances always coincided with occasions when I had to be elsewhere. So I had to send someone else to cover those appearances. But there were others who appeared at the school, and I was able to attend my fair share of those events.

There was one such occasion when I went to the school, expecting to meet a representative of the Russian space program. I walked in, figuring I was going to listen to some flunky, and quickly realized that I was covering an appearance by the ultimate veteran. Dr. Valeri Polyakov, according to my Googling, still holds the record for the longest single space flight. The guy was up in the Mir Space Station for 14 months in the 1990s, and that was not the only time he was ?up there.?

Of course he was a fascinating guy! It was one of the most memorable mornings I ever worked, as soon as I forgot about the attitude I had waltzed in with.

He was actually the first person I had ever met who had been in space, so the whole episode was new territory for me. I was taking notes like mad, taking down how he described how one deals with going to the bathroom in space, among other anecdotes. One of the amusing stories had to do with his getting used to being back on earth. He had grown accustomed to taking a swig from a mug of tea, then leaving the mug hanging in thin air. It took him a while to get used to gravity again, much to his wife's consternation.

The work that has gone into the space program has impacted all of us. The laptop on which I've been writing this piece would have put the computers that landed Armstrong and company on the moon to shame. And there is more great stuff to come.

Hundreds of years ago, men set out from their European homes to sail to worlds that had been unexplored, and civilization had been

established in those places within a couple of centuries. And those men were able to breathe the air in those new lands. There are complications involved with exploring space, but we human beings are smart people and we will find ways around them. Hansen convinced me of that last week, as if I needed convincing.

Hansen spoke about a possible trip to Mars. Of course he couldn't say exactly when that would come (I asked him because it was expected of me, not expecting a definite answer). That trip will come, and many more trips beyond that will come too.

I am 58 years of age. Hansen has not yet flown into space, but he told me there's a mission coming in 2018 in which there will be Canadian representation (two years from now), and he might get assigned to it. He doesn't know yet.

He can be well assured that if he gets that assignment two years from now, there will be a 60-year-old pulling for his success. And if Hansen isn't assigned to that mission, it will likely still go ahead, and that same 60-year-old will be pulling for its success.

The infinity of space will take many, many years to explore, and the best I can hope for is that I'll live to see the surface of that exploration scratched.

But there is so much more that I won't live to see, yet I know it will come.

The thought fills me with nothing but confidence and optimism.

