

Shouldn't forget the wonders above us?

Bill Rea's column, 'It'll soon be time to go to Mars?' (Dec. 11, 2014) was a welcome prompt to keep our eyes fixed on the bigger picture.

As I enter my seventh decade, I realize I recall the whole of man's long drawn-out and often halting romance with getting off-planet. I was around for Sputnik and Telstar satellites, Yuri Gagarin, Mariner 2 to Venus as the first successful spacecraft, the launches of Voyagers 1 and the amazing Voyager 2 that flew past Neptune and is still transmitting at 37 years out, the Apollo program and the moon landing, the Space Shuttles, the International Space Station, and Philae landing on Comet 67P last month.

Travelling off-planet is the great human adventure of our age, but it has yet to seem as important to much of our population as the sea voyages to the New World became to our ancestors. Each time we identify new frontiers to travel across, we underestimate the technical difficulties we will face. Yet as a species, we yearn to keep moving outwards, and likely always will until we are extinct. Our adventures beyond our atmosphere, while taking much longer than pundits thought when I was a young man, are our security against that extinction occurring. Travelling to new lands out in the vastness of the galaxy may well be our best option for continuing to evolve. Yet so many of us are no longer looking up at the night sky with longing and awe.

Part of the problem is our lighting up the night as we strive to be productive 24 hours in each day. When my kids were teenagers, we would lie on the beach outside a rental cottage at the northeast corner of Lake Superior looking up at the night sky. On a clear night, the whole Milky Way was in view above that vast and remote lake and landscape. Its thousands of twinkling stars formed a wondrously detailed panorama that most never see today. Somewhere across that sky, a summer meteor fell every minute or two and, even that long ago, several human-launched satellites could be seen at any one time as tiny but sharp dots moving evenly and quickly through near space.

Thank you for redrawing our attention to the wonders above us at this darkest time of our year.

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