

OUR LIVING SPHERE



In 1969, children of my generation watched a handful of men fly toward the moon, wondering what they would find on the cold, cratered surface of

a world not our own.

The possibilities seemed endless — not only for lunar exploration, but the wider odyssey into the rest of space. We dreamed of colonies on the moon and, perhaps not much later, on Mars, too. Back then, not yet a first-grader, I thought it fine to picture myself as a college student living on some shimmering interstellar outpost.

But settling the galactic frontier proved more elusive than we had thought. We grew bored with the moon and stopped sending people to visit. Blueprints for that great Martian metropolis apparently still rest on someone's drawing board. Now in middle age, I remain, it seems permanently, on my native planet.

It's here that I sometimes think about perhaps the greatest dividend of those early NASA years, when we pierced the big, blue lid of the sky and peered into the cosmos. What we discovered, much to our surprise, is that the scene was just as magical in the rearview mirror.

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Space travel allowed us to photograph Earth — the whole thing, a cosmic selfie. Holding our home planet at arm's length, like Hamlet regarding a skull, has enriched our sense of where we live and who we are.

From space, Earth resembles a big, bright ball, a child's first and essential toy. Our terrestrial home, it seems, is an homage to play, in all its forms, from baseball to poetry, from jacks to jazz, philosophy, debate, a writer crafting a sentence, a gymnast dancing on a beam. We are creatures of imagination and daring, alive on a sphere that calls us to create, to tinker, to laugh.

Seen another way, Earth is an eye, a cerulean organ of vision that bravely looks outward at the infinite black reaches, its curiosity unblinking and eternal. Our planet is a banner of our hunger to know. We are a learning tribe, though we seldom seem to learn as quickly or as deeply as we should.

Perhaps the best description of Earth lies within the pages of "The Lives of the Cell," by the remarkable medical essayist Lewis Thomas:

Viewed from the distance of the moon, the astonishing thing about the Earth, catching the breath, is that it is alive. The photographs show the dry, pounded surface of the moon in the foreground, dead as an old bone. Aloft, floating free beneath the moist, gleaming membrane of bright blue sky, is the rising Earth, the only exuberant thing in this part of the cosmos ... If you had been looking for a very long, geologic time, you could have seen the continents themselves in motion, drifting apart on their crustal plates, held afloat by the fire beneath. It has the organized, self-contained look of a live creature, full of information, marvelously skilled in handling the sun.

What Thomas describes, in short, is a miracle. If I am destined to stay on Earth, I tell myself, then this is not such a bad place to be.

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