

Spirituality in the Space Community

By Lawrence G. Downing, DMin

The *Space Journal* editor's assignment, if I cared to accept it (not Mission Impossible), is to write an article on "Space Spiritualism." Let it be said at the start: as a religious professional who has made a life-career of working with religious matters, I'm at a loss to define in succinct terms "spiritualism" or "spiritual." How is it possible to describe, in words, an emotional or intellectual experience? Think of the color blue, the smell of fresh-baked bread, or a love experience. The scientist can tell us what chemicals combine to produce blue pigments and describe the process that produces a smell. The physiologist can explain the hormonal changes that occur when we make love. But put into words, the feelings, emotions, pleasures that arise from within us from these externals, language falls short and equations fail. To add to the mystery, one person's response to a given stimulation may be far different from that of another. The same is true of spirituality or spiritual. The theologian can define spiritual and spirituality and write that definition in a dictionary, but when we have an encounter that takes us into an emotional or physical state that is above or beyond the normal, language is inadequate to convey the full story. What we can say about spirituality and spiritual is this: there are two components in the experience: an initiator and a human receptor. So what does all of this have to do with people who will inhabit a space community? Let me explain.

Thoughts about a community in space require consideration be given to the people who will live there. The candidates will be tested, measured, evaluated. Only the high percentile achievers will make the cut; the best of the best. Real life informs us that the most advanced and skilled vetting is no guarantee that the same problems that bedevil us on earth will not be replicated to one degree or another among those who inhabit a space community. In short, one cannot with 100% accuracy predict human behavior under all circumstances. The most intelligent and competent person can become irrational. None ought to be surprised when negative, hurtful, and violent behavior is evidenced among those who will construct and inhabit space communities. We may think we have human behavior figured. We may do all in our power to assure a compatible blend of people who are emotionally and intellectually competent to fulfill its purposes and goals. We conclude all is well, and ka boom! Something or someone will discombobulate our best efforts. It is human nature to throw monkey wrenches into the most finely tuned mechanisms. Space travel is not an antidote to our humanity. To complicate matters further, there are the children who will be born. It is impossible to determine the traits the second and later generations will exhibit.

The matters described above, I propose, have implicit and explicit spiritual implications. Each decision or event requires us to respond to situations that are not controlled by a formula or scientific theorem. Those who inhabit space communities will continue to make and depend upon laws and the personnel to enforce these laws and will implement consequence for violating the laws. The society will continue to promote moral and ethical behavior and these fall under the spiritual rubric.

The spiritual component within a community has potential to prompt us to strive toward a point beyond our natural inclinations or knowledge. When the human spiritual component functions well, it offers assurance when life events take us into uncharted territory. The inhabitants of space will experience hurt, distress, and loss. When one person is violent towards another, when illness, accident or death occurs, what does science have to say that offers solace or hope? The Periodic Table does not suffice in time of personal need.

How do we explain erratic or irrational behavior and what do we say to those who have been affected by such behavior? The spiritual disciplines speak to those who are in these situations or who are affected by them. A word of comfort and hope to the troubled soul is a good medicine; a word of assurance and hope to the one who has lost a loved one is a boon to the soul. One who employs the spiritual gifts has the courage to assure community members that they are not alone in the vastness of space. How we define that presence is open to interpretation. I believe that in a space community there will be diverse responses to whatever belief system or practice is practiced, just as there is here on earth. When we are there, wherever "there" is, we can expect to find beliefs or practices that are a continuum of those on earth-home. Other individuals may create belief systems that are responses to conditions that emerge from their space-home.

The context of diverse philosophies and religions raises the question of religious liberty. The space community may well struggle with the boundary matters that are implicit within a religious or philosophical matrix. What rituals or practices are acceptable? Which ones are not? Is the sacrifice of virgins to a planetary or sun god compatible with what a space community believes about life and its sacredness? Who and what will determine the taboos that are part of the community's value system? Will there be toleration for the person who chooses to hold one day more sacred than another or does conformity and the need for cohesiveness trump individual desire and belief? Will the space community transport the earth-laws with them?

The human spiritual component has been part of space-life since humans first were propelled into space. On December 24, 1968, Bill Andress, Jim Lovell and Frank Borman, the crew of Apollo 8, read in turn the creation story as recorded in Genesis 1. On the Apollo 11 mission, Buzz Aldrin received communion while standing on the moon. Off-air he read from scripture. It is to be expected that other space pioneers will show a similar regard for the spiritual as they venture forth into the unknown. What form the spiritual component will take is quite beyond our scope to predict. What we can say is that the men and women who inhabit space will take with them the values, practices, and beliefs that they held on earth. Likewise, the three philosophical questions await answer: Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? These timeless questions will be part of the baggage space travelers take with them. Each is a spiritual question. Each calls for an individual response. The quest to discover answers is a spiritual journey, unique to each person. It cannot be shared fully with others, not by lack of willingness or desire. Not at all! The limiter is language. How is it possible for us to express, in words, the feelings or experiences that are ours alone? This is the

conundrum that inhibits the ability to define, in precise terms, spiritual or spiritualism. But, as has been stated of other matters, you will know it when you experience it and that experience will be yours alone.

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About the Author: Lawrence Downing, DMin, has been a pastor for the Seventh-Day Adventist churches in the United States for more than forty years. He was an Adjunct Professor for both the School of Business and the School of Religion at La Sierra University, Riverside, California, 1990 to 2006. His DMin is from Lancaster Theological Seminary. He is a co-author of 2006, *Beyond Earth: The Future of Humans in Space*. Access www.bobkrone.com/vcat_details/24 to see the video interviews of Dr. Downing and Dr. Krone at the 2006 International Space Development Conference in Los Angeles.



Editor's Notes: Dr. Lawrence Downing is a pioneer for the complex field of Space Faith. He is Kepler Space Institute's Chair for ongoing research and documentation of Faith and Spirituality for the future of humans in Space. Our relationship since 1993 has been especially rewarding for me. My learning from Larry about Moral and Ethical Leadership continues. He walks his talk. It is an honor to include his article in this Spring 2013 issue of the *Journal Of Space Philosophy*. See, also Dr. Beata Chapman's article, "Widening the Dialogue about Faith in Space," in this issue. *Bob Krone, PhD*.