

Yes, There Really Was A Man-In-The-Moon

On summer Sundays in Minnesota, the parks and lakes dotting the Twin Cities welcome couples and families, soaking up 85-degree heat much as chipmunks store nuts for the coming winter. But on one remarkable Sunday in July, forty years and almost two generations ago, my young family sat together in the relative cool of our basement family room. We were there to witness a transcendent moment, along with some 600-million people world-wide.

Holding our two young daughters, we saw a fuzzy impossibility flicker across the television screen. And we listened to an iconic newsman, whose word had come to be regarded as the “truth,” confirm that a man had landed on the Moon. That afternoon, Walter Cronkite described what was arguably mankind’s greatest technical achievement, accomplished barely eight years after President John F. Kennedy had declared, “This nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to Earth.”

The date was July 20, 1969, almost six years after Cronkite carried out a heartbreaking task: telling a nation that it’s President, visionary of a grand moment which he would not live to see, had been shot dead. That was 1963, and as Camelot and a country buckled, Cronkite swallowed hard, unable to look into the camera. As Eagle landed on the moon, his composure frayed again as he shared a very different moment. Walter Cronkite grinned at the world, like a giddy schoolboy, and framed our wonder: “Oh, geez,” then a gush of nervous laughter, then “Oh, boy. Whew! Oh, boy.”

After walking and working on the Moon’s surface for 2½ hours, Neil Armstrong and “Buzz” Aldrin returned to the good ship Columbia and Michael Cooper; and, on July 24, their capsule splashed down 812 miles southwest of Hawaii, paying off Kennedy’s dream of “...returning (man) safely to Earth.” What had seemed impossible had been transformed into something that seemed “so easy.” For the first time since the early-1960’s, the nation and the world tasted joy.

Today we remember the three Apollo 11 astronauts, supported by all those at NASA, who crossed that great physical barrier of discovery, not with bluster or bravado, but with simple words: “The Eagle has landed,” and “That’s one small

step for man, one giant leap for mankind,” and even “Whoopie!” I recall Aldrin’s hope: “I’d like to take this opportunity to ask every person listening, whoever and wherever they may be, to pause for a moment and contemplate the events of the past few hours, and to give thanks in his or her own way.”

And once again, I imagine those three fragile men, trusting other fragile men as they flew 953,054 miles using nascent technology with less computing muscle than a cell phone, sharing an odyssey of colossal uncertainty. As a British scientist said, “(Apollo 11) would be inconceivable in the risk-averse world of today.” I hope that is not true, for beyond technology, beyond reestablishing America in the early space race, Apollo 11 was an ode to vision, innovation, leadership, determination and courage.

Apollo 11 asked more of man than seemed possible: to reach for the unthinkable, to push past boundaries of imagination and nerve, to find and define a new world. Forty years later, we once again need such bold vision, innovation, leadership, determination and courage. Not bluster, not bravado, just a “few (more) small steps for man.” Apollo 11 is an epic story worth re-telling, to those born after Eagle landed, and those who must now see past the trials of today.

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