

# Earthrise: A perspective from the moon

Saturday (July 20) was the 50th anniversary of man's first step on the moon. Neil Armstrong uttered those famous words, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

It was precisely 10:56:15 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time on Sunday, July 20, 1969.

Then for the next two and a half hours, he and Buzz Aldrin proceeded to collect rocks (47.5 pounds of them), raise the flag, read the commemorative plaque, and prove to the watching world that humanity had indeed stepped foot on another heavenly body.

I was at church camp at the time, in the boondocks of western Maryland, so tragically I missed the show. I hope y'all did better than me and watched this once-in-a-lifetime event, live with Walter Cronkite and Jules Bergman.

Only three and a half years later, on Dec. 14, 1972, another LEM ascent stage lifted off from the lunar surface to rejoin the Apollo 17 Command Module. Gene Cernan, the last man to walk off the moon's surface, gazed at the forbidding lunar horizon. He probably agreed with Buzz Aldrin's assessment of the sight (which I think he rehearsed for his first step on the surface): that the surface of the moon is a "Magnificent desolation."

Cernan reflected on the near certainty that it would be a long time before another human would visit this world: "... as I take man's last step from the surface, back home for some time to come — but we believe not too long into the future — I'd like to just [say] what I believe history will record. That America's challenge of today has forged man's

## COLUMNIST



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mankind."

Humanity hasn't been back since. It's been a lot longer than Cernan (or anyone else) could have imagined.

It would be nice to go back to the moon. It is a vast treasure trove for science. Our moon is, by far, the largest moon relative to its host planet in the entire Solar System. Ganymede of Jupiter, Titan of Saturn, Callisto and Io of Jupiter are all moons that are objectively larger than Luna. But none of these comes close to our moon in relative size: the moon is 1/4 the size of the earth (well, 27% to be exact). Ganymede is only .005 percent of Jupiter's size.

The relative size (or, really, mass) of our moon to the earth is the reason why there are tides at sea (because of the gravitational interaction), and why there are other influences (many unknown) that the moon exerts upon the earth. All the other moon-influences in the Solar System upon their host planets are negligible, if at all.

Related to this relative size is the odd and haunting fact that our moon is the same "apparent" size (i.e., the size of the tip of your

finger held up to the sky) as the Sun. Not only does this weird analogy produce perfect blazing corona solar eclipses, but it also makes for a startling singularity: nowhere else in the Solar System is there such an apparent similarity of size than our Moon and our Sun, seen from the Earth.



NEIL ARMSTRONG/  
NASA VIA AP

In this July 20, 1969, photo astronaut Buzz Aldrin, lunar module pilot, walks on the surface of the moon during the Apollo 11 extravehicular activity.

There are mineral deposits just waiting to be mined for profit, as Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos are quick to remind their stockholders. There is probably ice, NASA says. Which is important for human habitation and for that all-important goal of reaching Mars.

Presently, there is a burgeoning political push for a return to the moon and a flight to the beyond (like Mars). A recent op-ed in Forbes heartily endorses the idea. The reasons for such an enterprise are predictable. It would be great for science. It would be great for bringing people together to get behind a big glorious

project. It would be great for the markets (and great for the defense industry as well).

The Artemis Program heralded by the Trump Administration wants to return to the moon by 2024: this time, with a woman ("and the next man") landing on the moon. It may not cost proportionally as much as the Apollo Program, but NASA will have to increase its annual spending by no less than \$1.5 billion (and probably much, much more).

The space-junkie-nerd in me is all in for Artemis, of course. That same nerd (who was watching the wondrous "Apollo 11" documentary directed by Todd Douglas Miller last Saturday night) wrote, 51 years ago, to the Apollo 8 astronauts, supporting their reading of Genesis 1 on Christmas Eve in 1968 (against the boorish complaints of Madalyn Murray O'Hair); he glued together and painted models of Apollo 11;

suspended glow-in-the-dark planets and the moon from his bedroom ceiling; and watched every single incarnation of Star Trek and Star Wars.

But now there is also the "non-nerd": I'm not sure if another moonshot is worth it. I'm not sure at all whether another space race will gather to it the sort of heroism and unifying effect that came out of the famous JFK speech, which kicked off the old "Right Stuff" NASA quest of the sixties.

Remember those noble words he delivered on Sept. 12, 1962, at Rice Stadium in Houston: "We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge

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## MITCHENER

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that otherwise might have eluded him.

Honestly held differences do not require name-calling or put downs.

"You are wrong and here is why ..." need not lead to animosity for generations.

Strengthened by a good sense of humor and awareness of our finiteness let us ask and answer questions without evasion or bias or malice.

Are we up to this challenge? In September 2003 Hurricane Isabel devastated Edenton and Chowan County. No block in town escaped fallen trees, leaking roofs or scattered shingles. Black neighborhoods and white alike devastated.

Three trees criss-crossed my home driveway. I only had a hand saw, no chain saw. I wandered up the driveway to the curb on West Queen Street. Pine cones and

debris everywhere.

A man in his pickup truck approached from my right. He hoped to get through town to see if his business near the base airport was standing. He turned on his saw and started slicing the tree trunks across my driveway. He would not accept payment.

Fifteen years later, we are still friends. But our talks at the US Post Office for 15-20 minutes at a time are not just about ACC basketball. We talk wind farms, solar farms, migration, trade and tariffs plus education and healthcare as well.

We seldom agree. We never use ugly four-letter words. In 6-8 weeks we accidentally meet at the Post Office again. Little is resolved.

Passers-by raise eye brows as we are in broad open daylight. Again we part as friends.

Today being Sunday (the day I'm writing this), one final thought. In chapter 10 of the Acts of the Apostles verses 11-12 Peter has a vision about

all kinds of animals.

Some are unclean. Beginning in verse 15 Peter is told three times that what God declares clean he Peter must not declare common or unclean.

In the United States today on its southern border with Mexico is much

unhappiness and misery. Unkind words hurt and exacerbate tragedies from Central America.

In the manner of Justice Stevens "may I ask you a question? may I ask you a question? may I ask you a question?" Chowan County did not "deserve" Hurricane Isabel in 2003. But we worked together

to recover.

Let us work together for the common good.

Let us employ humor. Do not let unknowns divide us. Let us accept that the unknown is an opportunity for service as Luke declares in Chapter 10 of ACTS. Let us re-examine past votes as Sen. Ted

Kennedy wished to do.

Let us acknowledge shortcomings as the doctor did in the cancer case.

And let us listen more sympathetically to each other as we pursue "a more perfect union."

*John Mitchener is a father, grandfather, a former Chowan County commissioner and Lions Club president.*



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