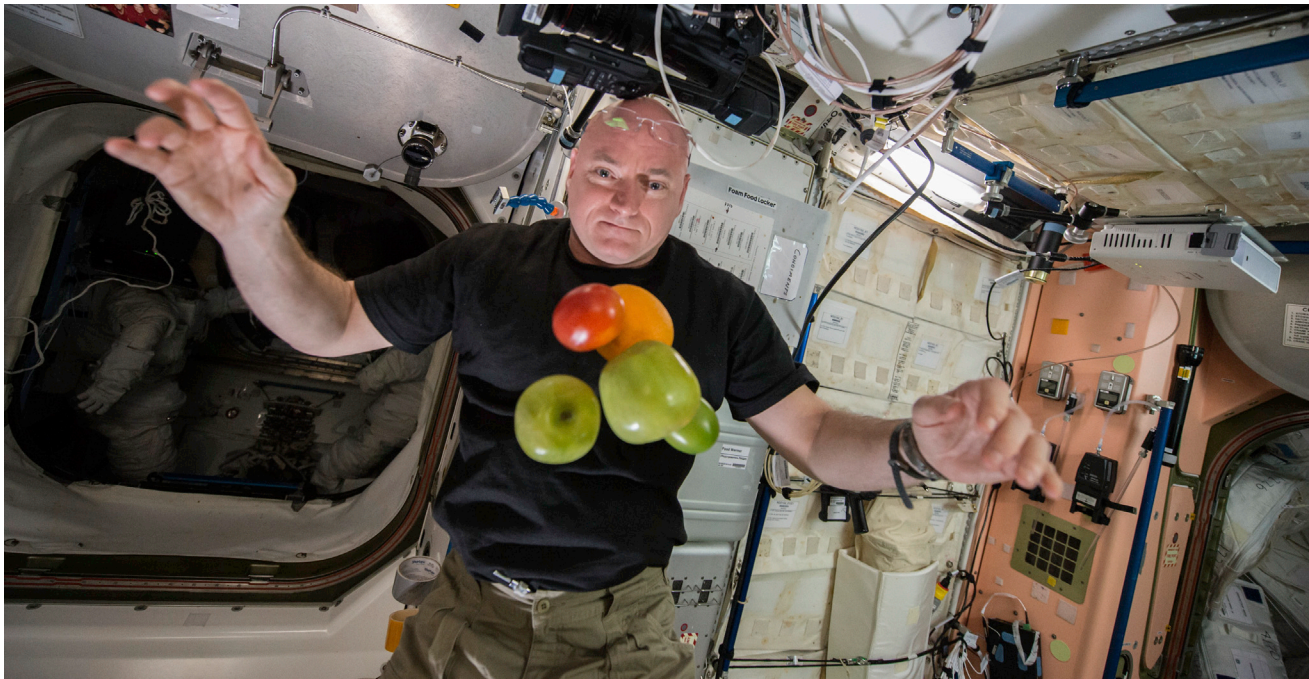


Conversations

An Extraordinary Astronaut

As of 2020, fewer than 600 individuals have left Earth to experience work and life in space. That number will grow as government-funded and commercial space programs move forward in countries around the globe. There are however major questions about how humans respond to spaceflight at every level, from the whole body to individual organs to specific cells to molecular pathways. Preparing for a future where longer-duration spaceflights are anticipated and people can begin to contemplate space tourism, researchers are studying astronauts to understand how the human system is affected by and adapts to space. **Lara Szewczak got a window on this world**, speaking with retired astronaut Scott Kelly about his late-blooming interest in science, what he's learned through the NASA Twins Study, and why space vacations might not be for everyone. They were joined by Chris Mason, a lead investigator looking at the 'omics of spaceflight. Excerpts from this conversation are presented below, and the full conversation is available with the article online.



Lara Szewczak: Thank you again, Scott, for taking the time to talk to us. I wanted to start off and ask you just a little bit about science in general because I saw that you tweeted that you never get tired of science. It was in regard to the pandemic, but I'm interested more broadly. Were you a science kid? Was this something you were always interested in or did that come later?

Scott Kelly: I forget who made the comment that prompted that tweet. I don't know if it was Trump or somebody said something about how they're just tired of the pandemic and the response to it. So, when the going gets tough, the tough give up, I guess. Some of my science-related tweets are really prompted by stuff that Trump says.

Was I a science kid? No. I was not a good student growing up. Sometimes science interested me, but I just couldn't pay attention in school. So, I did not consider myself at all an academic or a science-minded person at the time. Which shows that you can change your trajectory if you choose to and try really, really hard. It wasn't easy for me. Now I do consider myself a science-minded person. I believe in science, the importance of science. I don't consider myself a scientist because I think that would be an affront to real scientists. But yeah, I've done a lot of science experiments as a science operator, a scientific subject, but I would never claim to be a scientist.

LS: Is there a moment where you felt a shift to being more science minded?