

Look - Up in the Sky!

When television was young, there was a hugely popular show based on the still popular fictional character of Superman. The opening of that show had a familiar phrase that went, "Look. Up in the sky. It's a bird. It's a plane. It's Superman!" How beloved Superman has become in our culture and the worldwide fascination with extraterrestrials and all things cosmic only emphasizes that there is a deep curiosity in all humans about nature and astronomy, even if many people would not know to call it astronomy.

Astronomy is one of the oldest sciences of all time. When archeologists unearth ancient civilizations, even as far back as the cavemen, they invariably find art that shows man's unquenchable fascination with the stars. To this day, you can easily get an animated discussion at any gathering on the topic of "Is there intelligent life on other planets?"

Many have tried to explain mankind's seeming obsession with outer space as a result of an ancient memory or as part of mankind's eternal nature. Whatever the cause, people of every age and every nation share this one deep interest, to know more about the universe that our tiny planet is just a part of.

It's rather strange because the actual conduct of a serious student of astronomy is really not the stuff of high adventure. You will never see a "Raiders of the Lost Arc" or "Jurassic Park" movie made about an astronomer. Excitement for lovers of this science is to stay up all night watching the cosmos through a powerful telescope. But that fact does not seem to discourage the tens of thousands to get into astronomy each year and the huge interest worldwide with the stars, the planets and the universe.

There may be no other universal human fascination that does so much to make national boundaries and even international animosity seem to evaporate. Other than the Olympic movement, international cooperation to achieve great strides for human kind in space seems to go forward without interruption even when the nations cooperating in those projects are virtually at war back on the surface of the earth. It is a strange thing to watch as Russian, American and other astronauts work together like brothers on space missions even as their home nations are busily pointing missiles at each other back at home. It almost makes you think that we should put more energy and money into the space program, not less because it seems to be a bond that heals tension rather than creates it.

Why is astronomy so exciting even though we have no dinosaurs, moving animals or any real danger to most who are obsessed with the discipline? It may go back to a basic curiosity that all human beings have about their natural habitat and this big mysterious thing out there called space. Maybe it goes back to that old saying at the beginning of Star Trek that space is "the final frontier".

But we all share that ongoing sense of excitement each time we take out our telescopes and gaze directly at the cosmos above us. We feel we are looking at

the very dawn of time. And in light of the issues with the speed of light which means that many of the twinkling stars out there are really light from those stars that started their journey to us thousands of years ago, we are in actually looking directly at the past every time we direct our eyes skyward.

But we don't have to worry about ever conquering the final frontier and finding our curiosity satisfied. There will always be more to learn and discover in the world of astronomy. And it is likely that mankind's curiosity about astronomy is just as limitless as well.

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