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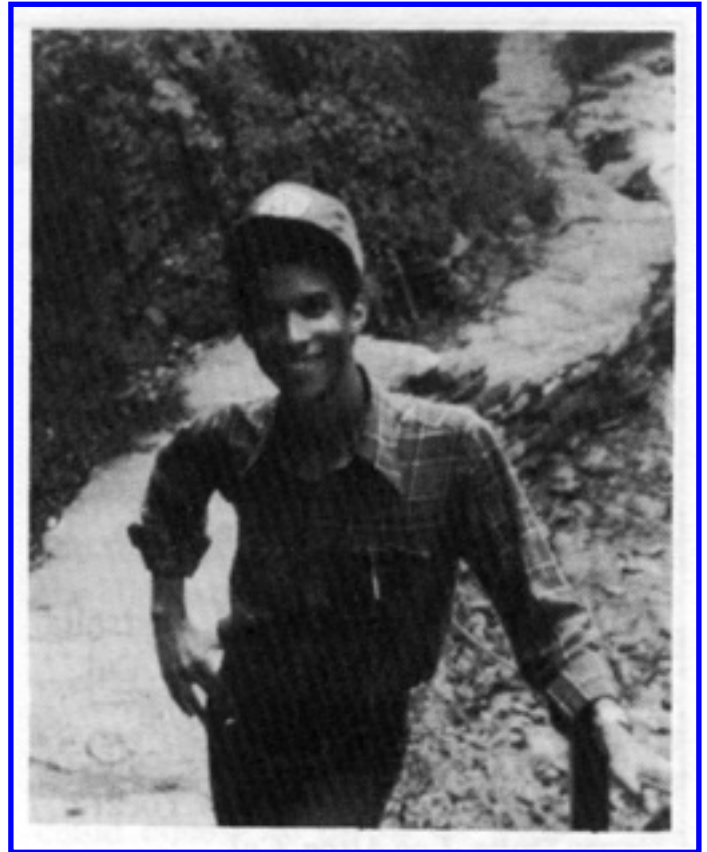
[Article in magazine started on page 10]

The Next Best Thing to Being There

By: William R. Dodson

This past year, as a summer student at the Kitt Peak National Observatory, I happened upon a rather interesting lunch-time discussion which the other summer students were having. It seems that they were wondering what the American public, since this was a national observatory we were all working at, was gaining from the research that was going on there.

"What," one of the students asked, "would we tell some little old lady who, while being shown around the facility, asked one of us why she was paying x number of dollars a year for astronomy research, and what was she, as a consumer, getting out of the deal?"



We were all silent for a few moments, each trying to imagine what he would say to the woman. "Well," one of the students hesitantly began, "if astronomers didn't study the sun, as an example, we wouldn't have the understanding that we do today of, let's say, radio interference — or even weather; both short range, as in tomorrow's forecast, and long range, as in three hundred years ago and three hundred years from now."

We all smiled at the answer, but none of us said anything. It wasn't the most outstanding answer in the world, we all silently agreed, but it was an answer nonetheless. "But what about the other stars?" entertained one of the other students, thoughtfully. "Why do we study, for instance, the spectrum of Betelgeuse?"

"That's easy," interjected the student who had answered the question first, "we study the other stars so that we can better understand our star so that we can better understand the effects that our star has on our planet." He sat, staring at the others,

awaiting their response.

"Hmmm," another student said, "so what about black holes and quasars and neutron stars and extraterrestrial intelligences and other wonderful things like that. Why do astronomers bother with those? They have no direct effect on our little sun. And even if, say, we did find that we had to alter some theories and realized that in another four billion years our sun was really going to turn into a black hole, instead of going the red giant then white dwarf route, what in the world could we do about it? Warn the public and then attempt to find a way to keep it from doing so?" He eyed each of us reprovingly, daring us to find his argument at fault.

Again, we were all silent. Foreheads furrowed and palms sweaty, we each tried to find a way out of our dilemma. "It seems to me, then," one other student said (I was the only one in the group who hadn't spoken), "that we'd give our nice old lady a sort of utilitarian answer. Something like, 'we study the universe to get a better idea of how we stand in it and how it affects us in our everyday lives here on Earth.'" He, too, looked at us all, awaiting some kind of response. "Well, what do you all think?" he asked, expectedly.

We all nodded in affirmation. That seemed to be the best answer of the day, and an answer that one would give to another who knew very little about Astronomy.

COSMIC SEARCH AWARD WINNER

This article is a **Cosmic Search** Award winner. Previous award winners were Don Lago's "Circles of Stone and Circles of Steel" in the March 1979 issue and Bruce E. Fleury's "The Aliens in Our Oceans: Dolphins as Analogs" in the Spring 1980 issue.

So, after having more or less agreed on a not-so-satisfactory answer, we merely sat there in our chairs, saying nothing, and staring at our empty lunch sacks. Luckily, it was the end of the lunch break, which meant that we all had to get back to work — which we did, and rather quickly at that, I might add; for, if the end hadn't come by then, we would have all been crushed by that thick silence which weighed so heavily upon each of us. A silence not born from the lack of anything to say, but a silence created in each of our minds and hearts from the feeling that there was

something much more basic, much more fundamental, and much more profound than our postulated answer to the nice old lady.

So I went back to work in an extremely muddled state of mind, a state which I was determined to remedy before my summer sojourn came to an end. That night, then, I decided to take a very long walk beneath the beautiful, diamond inlaid night sky that is Arizona's. That night, I decided to come to a conclusion — which I did.

One of the first loves of my life are the stars. Some love music, others love paintings, and still others love cars. I love the stars. The stars are humankind's next frontier. It is there, not here on this miniscule plot of land on which we were born, that we, as one, will grow from a spoiled, unkempt child into a wiser, more thoughtful, more caring adult.

Call it a 'Manifest Destiny', if you like — I believe it as such. I believe that humankind was meant to go out among the stars, to mingle with them, to call them brother or sister, to laugh with them, to cry with them.

We were not meant to play beneath just one sun, we were meant to run and sing and dance beneath many other suns — each sun just as different and varying as the many races which live on this, our prima domus.

But I do not believe myself to be the only person to feel this way. There are others, I know; because I have seen — we all have seen — the long and winding lines in and around movie theatres showing some space opera — whether it be the very newest or the very oldest. Most of us have seen the large crowds gathered at the doors of planetariums giving visual lectures on, for instance, "Einstein's Universe". And not too few of us have helped some young person to the eyepiece of a large telescope and heard him or her gasp in awe at the sheer beauty of the heavens.

But most dear to me is a conversation which I overheard in a donut shop in Tucson that same summer. It was between three women, who were, I'd judge, to be in their late sixties. They sat at the far end of the lunch counter while I sat but a few paces from them.

"Yes, I remember that night real well," a small woman with silver and white hair said. "I had just watched them get out of the ship and walk around a little, then I

decided to go and wash the dishes."

She took a sip from her white porcelain coffee cup while the other women looked on expectantly. She continued, "I walked to the kitchen sink, which was full of dishes, and looked out the window — the window being just above the sink. And out there, I saw the moon, which was just as big as could be. And I said to myself, 'How about that, there are actually men out there walking around. Isn't that something'. I never thought I'd ever see such a thing in my lifetime —"

"Yeah," one of the other women interrupted, "I know what you mean. We can't say any longer '...as impossible as flying to the moon' or 'the man in the moon' or 'the moon is made of green cheese' or anything like that. But, in spite of all that, it really is something."

"Yeah," the third woman nodded in agreement. And it was then that I left the little donut shop, a thick fog of euphoria keeping me from thinking clearly. If I was sure that they wouldn't have called the police on me, I would have hugged every one of those ladies and given each a big kiss.

And then there is Norman Mailer's, **Of a Fire on the Moon**, a personal recounting of the Apollo 11 moon landing mission. In it — himself, for all practical purposes, a layman — he relates the almost religious experiences which he felt while studying the different phases of the space program.

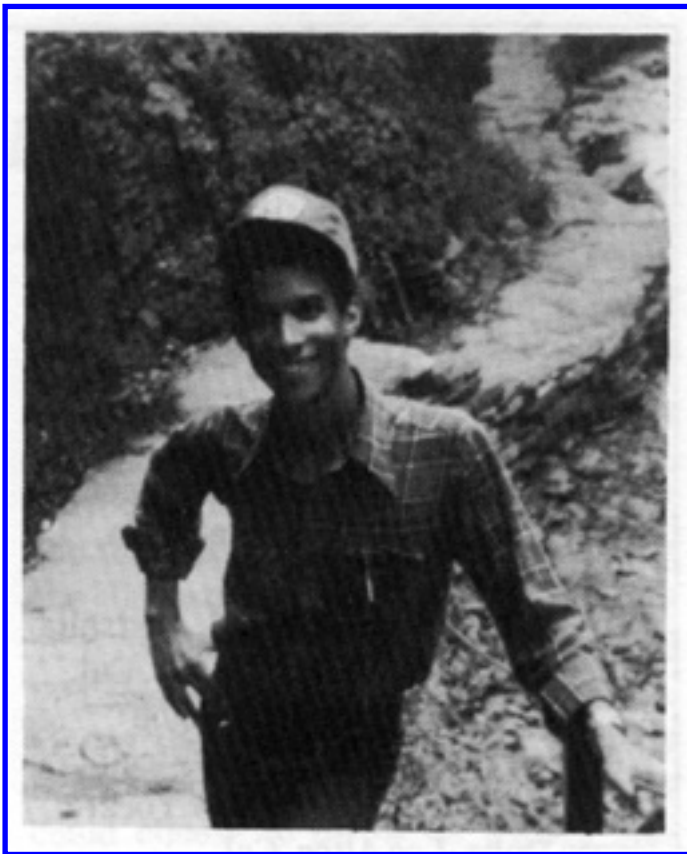
But most precious is his conclusion, in reasoning out the motives behind humankind's desire to venture into space.

I contend, however, that this "first revelation of the real intent of History", which Mr. Mailer speaks of, does not find its roots in the flight of Apollo 11, but that this first revelation was born thousands of years ago — when humankind first turned its eyes to the heavens and began wondering what lay out there among the myriad pinpoints of flickering light; when humankind, for lack of a means to break the grip which its mother, Earth, had upon it, first resolved to find its place in the cosmos; when humankind, that ever-curious, always searching race of beings, first vowed to discover if it was alone in the universe or merely one of a vast cosmic community stretching from star's end to star's end.

Astronomy, then, is the quest for these answers; but it is also more, much more. It is the tool through which each and every one of us travels through the cosmos to discover the answers to those questions which have gnawed at our souls for millennia. For most persons, these questions are, as Mr. Mailer puts it, "in the depths of the unconscious along with everything else most vital for the preservation of life". For others, these questions are among the most important things in their lives. But, whether it be myself, the three women in the donut shop, Norman Mailer, or our postulated nice old lady, these questions are there, in all of us, and we would all like nothing better than the answers to them.

Although we are no longer bound by gravity's chains, we still have a long way to go before we will be able to freely frolic among the stars, to actually see and touch those things and beings which are awaiting our interstellar debut.

So, until that time does arrive, we are now only able to watch, listen — and wonder; **for Astronomy, that vehicle of the mind which enables us all to roam the universe, is the next best thing to being there.**



William R. Dodson III is a sophomore physics major at Cornell University where he plans to continue for a Ph.D. degree in physics and a career in astronomical research. Ultimately he would like to do some popular science writing.

Born 19 years ago in Colorado Springs, Colorado, he had lived in all parts of the United States including Hawaii and Alaska during his father's tour of duty with the U.S. Air Force. As his prize-winning article "The Next Best Thing to Being There" suggests, William Dodson is a highly idealistic person. This is his first published article. We hope it is the

first of many more.



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