How a space hater becomes a space junkie

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Space has never really interested me.

When I was forced to go to a Star Trek museum at age 10 and a man dressed as a Klingon--the fictional warrior race--chased me around the gift shop, I was pretty much done with how “fun” space could be.

In my rural community, you could see a million stars. They were pretty, but I never really spent too much time thinking about them.

I took astronomy in college, but only for the credits. I never really enjoyed the topic, despite an (overly?) enthusiastic professor. I’m (somewhat) ashamed to say that when funding was cut for NASA, I didn’t really think about it too much.

Despite the fact that I’m generally a huge nerd, there was a distinct disconnect between myself and—cue dramatic music—The Final Frontier.

Until, that is, I saw Curiosity bust off its heat shield and land on the Surface of Mars.

Suddenly, I got it.

There is something inherently inspiring about space exploration. It’s part mystery, part hope, but also part childish excitement usually reserved for Christmas Eve and episodes of Sesame Street.

It kicks you out of your humdrum daily routine and forces you to think big and, embrace the vastness of the universe. It’s not just about one team at NASA completing a mission; it’s about humanity completing a mission. Yes, the economy is terrible and everyone is tired of political mudslinging, but for one moment, one solitary moment, we were united in celebration.

And it wasn’t just me. For the first time in recent history, people were talking about the space program in everyday conversation. They watched the videos of the landing, eagerly waited for new photos to arrive, and shared the experience with friends and family. Previously unheard of NASA engineers like Adam Steltzner, Entry, Descent and Landing (EDL) Lead Mechanical Engineer, and the mohawked Bobak Ferdowsi became household names. NASA found a way to get people excited again.

The mission even inspired a song called "NASA and We Know It", a parody of the now defunct LMFAO's Sexy and We know it"

It even connected generations.

Let’s take a look at a little speech by a man named JFK.

There is palpable excitement in the air.

But the Mars mission didn’t just inspire; it breathed life into a program many had discarded as a money pit. NASA has given the world a lot—where would we be without ~~Teflon~~ memory foam?—but it rarely receives its due.

Fortunately, for newly born and old school space junkies alike, NASA has done a killer job of publicizing all of its recent endeavors. With a masterful and fun understanding of social media, they’ve taken an institution that could have floundered into obscurity and captured an entirely new generation.

Not only do they have a multitude of hilarious and fantastic twitter feeds [1] (@ecnmag [2] follows @NASA religiously), but they’re also offering up incredible photos via @nasahqphoto [3] and videos on all of their YouTube channels. They have upwards of a dozen different feeds, depending on if you want to follow the Kennedy Center or get specific updates on the Voyager expedition.

Each space-related news item now fascinates me. From watching the Endeavor piggyback on an airplane to its resting place in LA or seeing the Enterprise float down the Hudson on a barge or reading about the Voyager (@NASAVoyager [4]) approaching intersteller space after a few decades--35 years to be exact--of travel.

Scientists now believe the warp speed might be possible.

Let's take a beat to appreciate the enormity of that statement. *Warp speed, people.* If that's not the coolest possibility ever, I don't know what is.

While I'm still not sold on alien movies—I just watched Men in Black for the first time—I'm much more fascinated by what exists outside of our tiny planet. I understand now that space exploration gives people hope. It exists entirely outside of socio-economic status, political views, or day job. It's a sacred arena in which you can say, or believe, anything is possible. So, sit back, relax and enjoy the awesome—original definition—power of the universe.

I'll be watching Firefly [5] reruns if you need me.

When were you first inspired by space? Share your stories in the comments!

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