



The Planetary Society

Why We Explore

by James D. Burke

In every age and in every place where humans have left records, we see evidence of a marvelous instinct. As soon as societies obtain by their labors even a little product beyond the needs of bare survival, they begin to create arts, to invent gods, to wonder and theorize about the universe. The line of descent from ancient legends to the modern quests of philosophy, religion, and science is direct and unequivocal. It is a constant of humanity to reach toward the future, to want to visit the stars, to want to know itself. It seems that this drive is just something contained in the human mind—or, if you wish, placed by a Creator in the fabric of spacetime where that mind resides.

At times it may seem that we have lost this exploratory urge, but always it returns, reshaped by current events. Why is it that we strive to understand our place in the heavens and seek other intelligences out there?

Yes, the cosmos is calling. But how do we sophisticated humans reply? Why not spend all our energies, skills, and resources on maintaining our beautiful home planet, relieving misery, educating each other, improving our civic behavior? Many answers are offered, but none is universally accepted. In all parts of the world, including many places whose living standard is relatively low, humans share dreams of a wider future. Governments, however, are sometimes unresponsive to this fundamental human urge. In trying to respond to short-term crises, they lose sight of the deeper purposes of a civilization.

Two decades ago, the enterprise of deep-space exploration was foundering. The American *Apollo* program had won the Moon race, and the failure of its Soviet competitor caused both manned lunar programs to collapse. Robotic lunar and planetary exploration, also an emblem of peaceful, competitive achievement by both societies during the Cold War, was dragged down, too, despite a string of remarkable achievements by both sides.

The Planetary Society was founded to remedy that situation. In 1980 our founders, Carl Sagan, Bruce Murray, and Louis Friedman, had a clear reason for launching the Society. They believed that people were ahead of their governments in realizing the long-term importance of reaching out into the starry void. Events soon proved them right. The Society grew explosively. Only three years after its founding, it was the world's largest space-advocacy organization. And the Society answers to its members in a particular way. We try to share with them not only the facts about humanity's drive to explore the Sun's realm, find planets of other stars, and seek other intelligences in the cosmos but also the wonder, the mystery, and the fun of responding to that drive.

Fun? At the taxpayers' expense? Yes. Fun and creativity are so closely linked in the human character as to be parts of the same behavior, and creativity is what changes the world. We deep-space explorers know that it is right for us to go on striving outward. We cannot articulate reasons that will satisfy everyone, and we do not know what we shall find. But we do know that we are part of some natural process, life seeking self-knowledge, life seeking other life.

The Planetary Society gives us one way to express this ancient human impulse. We shall continue.

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