

*(A personal message from  
Rusty Schweickart)*

As I write this message we're about a month away from celebrating the 50th anniversary of our Apollo 9 splashdown in the Atlantic Ocean on 13 March 1969. Celebrations are a time for recalling collective memories, for renewing old acquaintances, for laughs and for fun. And while I look forward to all of that with growing excitement, I'm also thinking about the historic significance of Apollo and what it means to me. Expressing something this deeply personal in the middle of a raucous celebration would be a bit of a damper. Still I'd like you to both know what I think about Apollo and consider it a bit yourself. Hence... this message to those of you checking out the website.

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Why do we celebrate the 50 anniversary of anything? The “thing” was the big deal, right? So then it must be to remind us of what that thing 50 years ago was. And why it is now still worthy of thinking about and celebrating. Was Apollo 9 that big a deal? Well it's certainly a big deal in that it was the mission that I flew on! In and of itself however, Apollo 9 was just one essential step of many in the Apollo Program. It didn't even go to the Moon! So what's the big deal? Big enough for me to have invited many, many people (YOU!) to come to San Diego in the middle of a week in March?

For me it's not any one flight. The big enough deal, for me, is to reflect on Apollo having been a collective decision, 50 years ago, to send out of the Earth a small cohort of humans to another world. From that barren, desolate, colorless world we humans (for we all went) looked back at Earth, the home of all the life that we know of, and realized in a personal way, that we both love the Earth (Mom) and are beginning a historic voyage into the larger cosmos. That is a big deal.

I choose to view this as cosmic birth. More pragmatic people might reflect on it as Kennedy's response to the Soviet geopolitical challenge. Or perhaps as the inevitable consequence of advances in rocket technology needed to deliver nuclear weapons. To me those, and other real and logical reasons, pale in comparison with the evolutionary mandate for life to grow and survive. And for Earth life this mandate translates into reaching out beyond the planet into the cosmos. We've now peeked out beyond the birth canal as far as the Moon, but we have no more of a clue than a baby of what life will hold. What we do know now is that we really love our Mom and that we are just beginning on an amazing journey!

The Apollo 8 guys “got-this” as they watched, almost in shock, the beautiful blue and white Earthrise over the grey, cratered, lunar horizon. Archibald Macleish “got-it” when he wrote about the crew half way to the Moon, looking back at the Earth “...what came to their minds was the life on that little, lonely, floating planet; that tiny raft in the enormous, empty night. “Is it inhabited?””

We went to the Moon as Americans; we'll go to Mars and on as people from Earth. I started the Association of Space Explorers at the height of the Cold War because I knew that it was far more important that we few astronauts and cosmonauts who had seen the Earth with our own eyes get together to celebrate our commonality and love for the planet than to remain separate in our national tribes. Today over 400 men and women from 38 countries, each of whom has flown in space, are members of

the ASE. We fly together on the International Space Station. We are well aware of the issues and tensions between and among our home nations. But we sense a larger future.

We've worked in laboratories and in the UN to develop the technology and geopolitical systems to protect the Earth from devastating asteroid impacts. The dinosaurs never had a chance to spread out into the cosmos and neither will we unless we use our wits and assume the responsibility to protect Earth life from future catastrophic impacts. And do this we must if we're to have the time needed to become, as Elon Musk says, a multi-planet species.

So for me, this is the big deal worthy of celebration 50 years after we first landed on the Moon. Landed on the Moon... and looked back at the Earth! What we saw was a fantastic reality; the unbelievably beautiful home of all the life in our little corner of the Universe. What we realized was our responsibility for doing whatever we can to extend and continue this amazing evolutionary experiment we call life.

Now what's a bigger deal than that?

So wherever you are (or were) on March 13, 2019, we're all together, one way or another.