

A Member of the Crew
By
Daniel E. White June 22, 2026

Imagine the knock on your door in the early morning meant that, in a few short hours, you and your colleagues will be strapped into seats atop a very large, controlled explosion. You and they have trained for this moment for several years. The training, no doubt, covered the possibility that the explosion would not remain contained, and the knock on the door would be the last one you ever hear. You show up anyway, get in your seat. That takes courage, born of the trust you have in all who are involved in the endeavor.

I don't remember how I reacted in the 1960s when President Kennedy set going to the moon as a national priority. I can imagine the idea of standing on the moon stirred by my imagination. But I don't ever remember being stoked about becoming an astronaut and actually standing on the moon. At age 13, I also wasn't evaluating whether or not spending the money to achieve that goal was a good use of public funds, either.

I have always been a fan of the space program. I understand those who say that the very large amounts of money spent on the program could be used to address needs here on earth. But our experience with decision-making about public money reminds us that there is no guarantee that money saved from not pursuing one goal will be spent on addressing other needs we see confronting people in our country.

So, why not use some funds on exploring space?

As an adult, I have come to believe that there are several good reasons for the position I have taken. First: we know that the space program of the 1960s produced a host of inventions and understandings about how things can work that became useful well beyond the space program itself. Google that if you don't believe me.

Secondly, the program satisfies two basic human needs—to address our collective curiosity (and we have been curious about the heavens above us for millenia) and to lift our vision up from the man-made humbugs of political partisanship or whose religion is right. As far as space is concerned, we are already bonded together as inhabitants of planet earth, not separated into classes, parties, races, or nationalities. So why not treat our fellow crew members a little better?

And third, how can our understanding of human life NOT be impacted by virtue of the insights of thoughtful observers thousands of miles away from Earth share with us upon their return?

Neil Armstrong's twelve words spoken upon stepping onto the surface of the moon were a statement of accomplishment and a challenge for those of us sharing the planet: "That's one

small step for a man; one giant leap for mankind." The first part is obviously true. It was a small step for one man. The second is an aspiration: mankind acting together toward shared goals.

Reporter Brie Stimson wrote in "Bonded Forever," (Fox News online, April 11, 2026) about the Artemis II astronauts, that Christina Koch said, "Ten days ago, this journey started with our mission manager, Sean Duvall, knocking on my door in crew quarters and whispering "Christina, we're go for launch. Get up."

"And it ended last night when my nurse on the ship put me to bed and said, "Ma'am, can I get a hug?"

Christina said she had a new understanding of the meaning of the word "crew" since their mission. "A crew is people... in it all the time, no matter..., stroking together every minute with the same purpose willing to sacrifice silently for each other," she said. "That gives grace. That holds accountable. A crew has the same cares and the same needs, and a crew is inescapably, beautifully, dutifully linked. So, when we saw Tiny Earth, people asked our crew what impressions we had, and honestly, what struck me wasn't necessarily just Earth. It was the blackness all around it."

She now thinks of Earth as a "lifeboat" in a universe of blackness. "Planet Earth, you are a crew," she added.

Isn't Koch reminding us that the blackness is the norm in space and suggesting that there is no guarantee of persistence over time of the bright orb of Earth?

Jeremy Hansen added of their crew "What you saw was a group of people who loved contributing, having meaningful contribution and extracting joy out of it," he added with his arms around his crew members.

"I would suggest to you that when you look up here, you're not looking at us," he continued. "We are a mirror reflecting you. And if you like what you see, then just look a little deeper. This is you."

The partisan silliness that dominates the news notwithstanding, Hansen could be right. Artemis II COULD make us focus on what binds us together, as a crew, each responsible in our own way to ensure that the bright orb of Earth endures.

Or not.

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