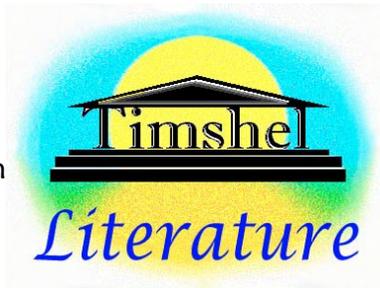


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Just Thinking, 02/03/03:

What Is in Space and What We're Told Isn't

by Justin Katz

I was in Mr. C's music class during my school's moment of silence for those onboard the space shuttle *Challenger*. I remember the teachers wheeling a television into our grade's hallway to watch the coverage, but I don't remember whether it was live or after the explosion. My sense is that it was after, but my adult rationality suggests that it must have been live. I do remember that, in grade school, we thought all of our teachers must surely have had some special personal connection to Christa McAuliffe, the teacher who joined the astronauts in history.

The following summer, I found that I'd been more personally invested than I'd thought. At an itinerant circus in Vermont, an older boy in a vendor booth had just finished inflating a toy space shuttle and threw it along the counter to the girl with whom he was working. Not designed to actually fly, the mock shuttle crashed halfway. "Hey," said the young man, "it must have been the *Challenger*."

I couldn't verbalize my offense at the comment back then. I didn't even know anybody who knew anybody who died; I am also of a generation that has made death a plaything. Astronauts, however, are pioneers in the quest for knowledge and understanding of our universe. They are the human focal point of our nation's shared ambitions for the future — the ones taking

the first steps toward whatever it is that we're searching for. For that reason, they deserve more than the ordinary amount of respect.

That includes the treatment of the circumstances of their deaths. I understand that newspapers must exaggerate and simplify to make stories compelling and comprehensible to a maximum number of readers. But I cringe at the lunge to assign blame and fill in the missing plot points of the drama. The story, in the case of the *Columbia*, strikes me as only vaguely defined, and the blame as widely dispersed. More than likely, the unique, deliberate pressures that each person in a line of command must address pushed open a crack that ultimately took the shuttle down.

At its outer edge, the underlying problem is that the general population just doesn't feel a need to "see what's on Mars" (as a representative accomplishment). More importantly, I think part of the reason for this blasé reaction to space exploration is that scientists and their fans have convinced us that we have reached the heart of practical reality and just have some scientific threads to follow... some gaps to fill... some intergalactic rocks to find.

I don't remember the last time I heard that the payoff for the risk of losing lives and money to the void of space might be something earth-shattering. Something tangible yet completely new and unexpected. Therefore, the political will does not exist to devote the necessary funds to such dangerous exploration. Perhaps we'd find something that sheds light on the distant past or the distant future or some abstract theory beyond the reach of the average American. Better, if that were the case, to devote the resources more directly to changing lives.

The riches of the human imagination cannot be tapped while stationary. We want change and signs that we are headed toward a destination. The day of *Columbia's* failed reentry, Peggy Noonan compiled some of the circumstances of its destruction that could be taken as signs of a different type:

We are on the verge of war in the Mideast, a war springing in its modern origins from the tensions of the Arab-Israeli conflict; our president, a Texan, believes we must move on Iraq. The space shuttle that broke up today carried, for the first time ever, a Mideastern astronaut, an Israeli who won fame when he led a daring raid on a nuclear reactor in Iraq, 20 years ago. The shuttle broke up over the president's home state, Texas. The center of the debris field appears to be a little town called Palestine.

Catholic writer Rod Dreher makes some of the same observations and says, "I hear more and more things like this, a suspicion shared by intelligent, non-nutty people, and not necessarily religious people either, that Something Is Up." Mr. Dreher then links to another column from Ms. Noonan, this one from 1998:

Our entertainment industry, interestingly enough, has plucked something from the unconscious of a small collective. For about 30 years now, but accelerating quickly this decade, the industry has been telling us about The Big Terrible Thing. Space aliens come and scare us, nuts with nukes try to blow us up.

Something's up. And deep down, where the body meets the soul, we are fearful. We fear, down so deep it hasn't even risen to the point of articulation, that with all our comforts and amusements, with all our toys and bells and whistles... we wonder if what we really have is... a first-class stateroom on the Titanic. Everything's wonderful, but a world is ending and we sense it.

I don't think I'm alone in thinking that September 11 was not that big thing; we're certainly not acting as if it was. However, I now hope that a product of Hollywood from after the change in millennium and after September 11 – the movie *Signs* – has also tapped into something that we collectively sense. The movies of the nineties and earlier dealt with aliens as a product of the imagination, sometimes as a metaphor, asking *what if* they were real. *Signs* goes a bit further, asking what aliens' reality would mean for our beliefs about our lives and God's presence in them. As Graham, Mel Gibson's character, explains midway through the movie, for non-believers, an alien invasion would signal a complete reshuffling of the rules of reality; for believers, it would

merely be another unexpected part of earthly life. In other words, the contingencies would change, but the core of life's meaning remains.

We laugh, now, at those worrywarts of the past who warned that we had no way of knowing what frightening things astronauts might bring back from beyond our atmosphere, whether diseases or creatures... or even dangerous knowledge. Maybe there's a flip side to our present confidence in our ability to predict what will come of our exploration. If there are no surprises, if exploring space can bring us no closer to understanding *why* we are here, if we will not, by heading out into the frontiers, find further explanation of the closeness that we feel to each other and even to the vast universe, then we might as well stay home. And survive.

Even though surviving is all that it would be.