

The Cow Jumped over the Moon

SUSAN BURKAT TRUBEY*

Hey, Diddle Diddle,
The cat and the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the moon,
The little dog laughed to see such a sight,
And the dish ran away with the spoon.

This traditional nursery rhyme represents the absurdity of the moon being reachable. However, it was in my lifetime that this reality would shift.

In 1961, our President, John F. Kennedy announced the beginning of the race to space. We would commit resources and finances to compete with the Russians with the ultimate goal of a moon landing by the end of the decade.

I grew up in the Boston suburb of Brookline, Massachusetts. In the early 1960s, while still in grade school, the space program took on the aspect of a combination of two very dissimilar concepts. The first was the idea that man, in all its genius, was able to conquer space. It would no longer be a world where the “man in the moon” would be a figure of speech, but an actual place. The second concept that spurred the enthusiasm was the push to “beat the Russians”. The cold war had taken the safety from our lives – leaving us school children to learn where the nearest air raid shelter was located and to practice curling up and covering our heads in the school gymnasium. So, with both pride and

* Investigadora independente.
E-mail: rhino@sapo.pt.

the determination to win, our school provided televised broadcasts of the early flights. All the students were taken to the auditorium where we watched these space launches. I can no longer remember what type of audio-visual equipment was used, but I remember the teachers and the principal trying to coax out a simply grainy black-and-white picture while we all sat open-mouthed for the take off. Everyone was excited. I asked an old friend to collaborate my memories of these times and events. Her conclusion was different than what I had expected or considered:

I cared. I can't speak for the rest of the kids. Obviously, the school cared. But thinking about it now, I am amazed that the school would have shown this stuff live. We were relatively young, and anything could have happened. People could have blown up on the launch pad, upon liftoff, upon reentry, as they did later on. And surely the school wouldn't have wanted a school full of kids crying and traumatized. This was long before the era of school shootings.

Through my high school years, the space launches and landings had become commonplace and I do not recall anyone watching on television or simply talking about them. Had America changed? Or was it just me?

From that early exhilarating feeling about the initial space explorations, I remember nothing else about any space advance or adventure until I lived in a dormitory during my first year in college. It appeared that everyone else was interested and their enthusiasm sparked mine, once again. There was to be a major crewed mission the next month, February 1967. However, in a test session in January, 1967, there was an accident onboard killing all three men: Gus Grissom, Edward White, and Roger Chaffee. We needed to know what had happened.

There was a large shared entertainment room for television watching. Of course, no one had any personal electronic devices at that time and I don't remember anyone having a television in her own room, maybe just a small radio. That evening, people walked in and out, maybe 20 or so maximum at any one time. We all struggled with the sorrow of their deaths. Then the conversation turned to the relevant questions: What were we doing up there? Was the risk of human life worth the value of exploration? Had this accident been human error? What would the Russians think of our failure?

There was raging debate over the cost of the space program, regarding allocation of resources. Would this money have been better spent for education or the military? Or even if we wanted the militarization of our space exploration.

The question we did not think to ask at that time was the concept and practice of what space exploration would do to our future and the financing of

what was to become a technology revolution. And this was perhaps the greatest benefit of the push for space exploration. The new technology being developed for the space program would become adapted for personal use. Our future attachment and later seemingly necessary computerized technology would be for personal and business use as well as the complete overhaul of communications. It began with digital watches and hand-held calculators which were considered “toys” for the wealthy, intellectual elite. We had no idea how this would develop.

The Apollo space landing occurred on July 20, 1969. I was already an adult and a mother of an infant. My personal memories take me to this date in relation to where I was. It was my father’s 50th birthday weekend and the whole family had gathered in their Connecticut home. As an indication of the cultural identity of the television, in my family, the set was relegated to a spare guest room as my parents considered television a culturally devoid entertainment device. So, we were about 10 people crowded into one small bedroom, three generations, all anxiously awaiting what we thought of as the culmination of 10 years of space exploration. We were finally going to be able to prove that we could do it and that the costs of both men and dollars would be justified.

It was exhilarating and grossly exceeded our anticipation of the event. There was a general pride in humankind as well as a pride in Americans as the leaders. This dichotomy held unbounded enthusiasm.

In retrospect, I remember my mother saying that future astronauts had to be trained in the specific field of learning how to express their thoughts. I recalled the famous boast of “one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind” and hadn’t recalled that the actual transcript ran more along the lines of “wow, what a cool rock”. I now assume that the famous line had been scripted for him. Astronauts were selected for their flight experience, engineering background, age, and physical stature and condition. But, for any experiment or exploration to provide meaningful analysis, excellent communication is essential.

I have not seen any televised space program launches or even followed the news about the Space Stations in the last years. From what were incredible breakthroughs, has come a complacency on my part – and maybe for most people. However, I am grateful that I was able to experience these events and that humankind has expanded its horizons.

The dish is no longer running away from the spoon.