

Thrillin' at the MacMillan #3: SPACE'S BEST KEPT SECRET

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SPACE'S BEST KEPT SECRET [by] Spider Robinson

The spiritual impulse can be a dangerous thing when it goes public. Ask anyone who was in New York five years ago, or anyone still alive in Baghdad today.

Richard Dawkins, famous author of *THE SELFISH GENE*, has a new book out, *THE GOD DELUSION*, which argues that spirituality, at least when expressed in a religion, should be vigorously controlled, if not outlawed altogether, for the safety of society. He feels that agnostics are cop-outs—that religious people are so intolerant, they can no longer be tolerated. Unlike rational people such as himself. And many in the post-9/11 world agree, however reluctantly.

Even long before the towers fell, public discussion of spirituality was always dangerous, or at best awkward—because it usually involves either choosing up sides, or so ostentatiously refusing to that all sides end up despising the speaker equally. It's hard to talk about spirituality without talking about religion, and most of the world's religions are, whether they admit it or not, mutually exclusive.

That's the only way I can explain the odd fact that spirituality is one of the least-known attractions of space travel.

Discussions of the potential uses of space usually break down into three categories: military, scientific, and recreational. Nobody ever seems to talk about going to space to *meditate*. But for the last forty years we have sent into space almost nothing but military jocks and science nerds...and the vast majority have come back changed, spiritually transformed in some way. They have a new and more intimate relationship with the infinite, having met it and spent time in its home. And they have a deeper love for their planet and its entire biosphere.

The one complaint every Apollo astronaut had was that they bitterly wished they were not kept so busy every second; to a man, they yearned for even a few moments of quiet contemplation of all that nothingness out there. The Shuttle astronauts who came after them frequently express the same frustration.

The religious impulse is an attempt to establish a dialogue with the universe.

Shouldn't it be obvious that it helps to go out there and meet it halfway? Throughout history, holy men have come down from high mountains glowing like neon tubes with spiritual insight—is it any wonder that on the highest mountain there is, High Orbit, the phenomenon can be so powerful that even laymen are affected?

You bet it's a wonder.

Zero gravity seems to add something, they say. A womblike effect. Tranquility. The body stops constantly muttering that it wishes you'd let it lie down now, on something soft. Up and down cease to mean anything, freeing the mind to think new thoughts. My wife is a Soto Zen Buddhist monk, and she and I have co-written a book out now called THE STARDANCE TRILOGY which attempts, among other things, to make Zen sitting meditation or zazen work in zero-G where sitting is impossible: kukanzen, she named it, the Zen of space. We spent three novels arguing that simply being in space is going to help the human race evolve spiritually...and none too soon.

Clarification: Buddhism, though spiritual as it gets, is not a religion in the sense Dawkins means. There are Catholic Buddhists, Jewish Buddhists, Muslim Buddhists. Buddhism has no deity: in essence it is simply an agreement to practice sitting together, a conviction that all things are fundamentally interconnected. There are other such faiths—far too few.

Almost unique among spiritual leaders, the Dalai Lama values reason. For centuries, Buddhism taught that the moon generated light; as a child the Dalai Lama looked through a telescope, saw shadows in all the craters, and at once told the scholars to change the texts: doctrine was wrong. That's my kind of spiritual leader. The kind this planet needs more of desperately.

Spirituality attempts to grapple with mortality. Many of us avoid it for that reason, and try to live our lives thinking of our death as little as possible. But if you go up there and look eternity in the face, if you see for yourself how impossibly vast the cosmos is, it's difficult not to be struck by both how insignificant you are, and how awesome it is that you should be aware of that, how precious and miraculous and interconnected all life is.

This communion with vastness is transformative, and teaches us that we really are all made of the same atoms of stardust, just like our science teachers tried to tell us—that we are not separate. To see the entire matrix of earthly life at once, and in the same glance perceive the awful sea of emptiness in which it exists, is to feel the need to build a world of peace and cooperation.

Many writers have commented on the profound spiritual impact on humanity of the first Apollo 8 photographs of the entire planet at once, and of Earthrise on the moon. Those are flat photos. Think of the difference between a flat photo of someone sexy, and good lovemaking. That's how amazing it's going to be to go out there and see the universe with your own eyes, one day soon. Save your pennies.

I hope I get a chance to meditate in space, before I die...and if I don't, I pray my daughter will. There is, after all, only a single human we know of who already does get to see the entire planet Earth at least once every single year, right around this season—and he is said to be a man of extraordinary compassion and generosity.

And to all a good night....

BC writer Spider Robinson's 34th book *THE STARDANCE TRILOGY*, a Hugo and Nebula Award-winning collaboration with choreographer Jeanne Robinson, is available from Baen Books; for further information visit [<http://www.spiderrobinson.com>](http://www.spiderrobinson.com) or [<http://www.baen.com/author_catalog.asp?author=srobinson>](http://www.baen.com/author_catalog.asp?author=srobinson). Comments on this or any other SR RESPONDS column should be sent via [<http://www.spiderrobinson.com>](http://www.spiderrobinson.com)