

## ***GOD IS NOT A TRAFFIC COP***

**By Michael Ventura**

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As I write on May 29, the toilet is out of order on the space station. It's handling "solid waste" alright (NASA does not say "feces"), but not urine (a word NASA's OK with). NASA is coy about how exactly the station's three spacefarers are coping with problems unforeseen on *Star Trek*. Fortunately, the shuttle Discovery launches on Saturday, May 31, and they've made room for a toilet pump replacement, plus "a gas/liquid separator, urine collector bags, filter and other hardware" – you can read about that, and much more, on [www.nasa.gov](http://www.nasa.gov). Associated Press reports are careful to note that the toilet is Russian, and the Russians can't figure out what's wrong with it, but they hope the pump will help. It was flown to the U.S. in "a diplomatic bag," and, though I know what they mean by that, it's still a comic touch also unforeseen in science fiction.

Saturday, May 31, will have come and gone by the time you read this, and we'll know whether or not Discovery's arrived at the space station safe and sound; but on that Saturday, I'll check the news often until I know the fate of the spacefarers. I always do, whenever a shuttle launches or returns – and as I did last Sunday, May 25, when that audacious craft, NASA's Phoenix Mars Lander, made our first controlled soft landing on Mars. I say "our" because, though most of us aren't involved, and lots of us don't know or care, the space program is an effort of, by and for our species – and nothing can make me so blasé as not to find this thrilling. Slowly, haltingly, meticulously, excruciatingly, with incredible courage, many failures, and several deaths (while the media pay little attention anymore unless something goes wrong) -- we *are* reaching out. We have become a space-faring species.

"We," all of us – not only is the toilet Russian, but from its beginning the space station has been mainly a Russian-U.S. enterprise (no pun intended). The intricate and (so far) perfectly operating weather station on the Phoenix Mars Lander was designed and constructed by the Canadian Space Agency, at a cost of \$37 million – part of the \$430 million total price-tag, to find what Mars is made of and if, eventually, human beings can live and work there (*New York Times*, May 26, p.13). Japan designed and built the Discovery's main payload, a 37-foot long and 14.4 foot wide laboratory, the Kibo ("hope" in Japanese) (*New York Times*, May 27, p.F2). Bit by bit, module by module, expedition by expedition, we're making our way.

Painfully, too, what "with roughly two-thirds of all spacecraft destined for Mars failing before completing their missions" (Wikipedia). Yet now there's the slide-show on Yahoo!News (May 29) showing, among other views, "one of the Phoenix Mars Lander's feet planted on the Martian surface." The little kid in me goes, "That's our feet! *My* foot!" I believe what John Donne wrote, that "every man's death diminishes me, because I am a part of mankind"; and I believe its corollary, that every genuine human triumph enhances me, because we are part of each other. Sometimes that's the most terrible fact of all, for it gives you a personal share in every atrocity, the doer as well as the victim; but sometimes it's the most marvelous fact of all, for it gives you a personal share in every wonder.

There are folks who believe that an interplanetary, intergalactic humanity will be somehow better than humanity is here. I am not of that persuasion. If we make it out

there, we'll be who we are, we'll do what we do. We'll change, and stay the same, at the same time – as the Europeans did when they came to what, for them, was the “New World.” We're nuts and we'll stay nuts. I personally don't have a problem with that. But the adventure of the thing! We are a species that loves adventure for its own sake, and, again personally, that's what I respect most about us.

So I'm proud, in a kidlike way, of Peggy A. Whitson. In 2007, she boarded a Russian Soyuz craft to become the first woman to command the International Space Station. She'd been on the ISS before, as what *Star Trek* would call its “science officer.” As commander, one of her first duties was to greet a Discovery crew also commanded by a woman, Pamela A. Melroy. Peggy Whitson is a biochemist turned space commander, born in Iowa in 1960. Reports ScienceDaily (April 21): By the time her command mission was done and she landed at the Balkonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan on April 19 – with cosmonaut Yuri Malenchenko and “spaceflight participant” So-yeon Yi, a Korean woman – Whitson had broken the record for time in space for a U.S. astronaut: 192 days, during which she did six space-walks totaling what to me is an incredible 39 hours and 46 minutes – more than a day and a half of hard work (they *work* on those “walks”), with nothing between her and infinity but a suit that could be easily punctured by a passing mite of space-matter. Her colleague Malenchenko has tallied 515 space-days on his four missions, “the ninth highest total of cumulative time in space of all humans.” What with all the nonsense we focus on daily, I find it bracing to know of these daring people on their serious adventures.

So I like knowing the name of the first woman in space: Valentina Vladimirovna Tereshkova, manning (womanning?) Vostok 6, June 16, 1963. She married cosmonaut Andrian Nikolayev. Their daughter, Elena Andrianova, now a doctor, is the first human being to have a mother and father who have “traveled” (Wikipedia's word) in space. Ms. Tereshkova was fetted on her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday last year by Vladimir Putin, then president and now prime minister of Russia; she told him she'd like to go to Mars, “even if it meant it was a one-way trip.”

Stuff's happening up there all the time. Nasa.gov, May 16: “A new Progress cargo carrier docked [with]...the International Space Station's Zarya module... with more than 2.3 tons of fuel, oxygen, air, water, propellant and other supplies and equipment on board.” When unloaded, it'll be “filled with trash and station discards...undocked from the station and... de-orbited to burn in Earth's atmosphere.” And here's hoping a toilet-seat won't land on anyone in Seattle as it did on Ellen Muth in the first episode of the superb series *Dead Like Me* – though that's the way we often think of our space efforts, when we think of them at all.

Wrote Chris Kraft, the first NASA Flight Director, in his memoir *Flight: My Life in Mission Control*: “Until 1957, nothing man-made had been into orbital space. In 2001 [as in 2008], the common events of our lives are touched by space. The most visible and dramatic technology advance was the communications satellite, developed by NASA. We see and hear the rest of the world in real time, and we take it for granted.” Cell phones, WiFi, instantaneous communication of all sorts world-wide – none of it possible without these adventurous space-engineers and explorers. It would be too much of a stretch to say we're already a space society, but not too much to say that humanity has extended itself into space in a way we all participate in every day.

I may not have the quote exactly right, it's been many years since I committed the paragraph to memory, but the aviator and writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery said that to be "a man" (by which he meant an adult) is "to feel shame at the unmerited misery of others, [and] joy in a victory won by one's comrades." As perfect as the Phoenix Mars Lander has been so far, there is another human perfection – the sharing of deserved triumph -- in looking at the NASA photos of its engineers when they realized they'd done it, a perfect, controlled Mars landing... names we'll read for a moment and quickly forget: Barry Goldstein, Peter Smith, Guy Bujold, Ed Sedivy... their exultant faces, that rare moment of genuine triumph shining out amidst all the phony triumphal posturing of so many of our public figures. Through their work, they got to Mars.

Go, now, to Google Sky, it's the universe at your fingertips, in your living room, at your desk, on your lap – galaxies are colliding out there! And we're taking pictures of them! The pictures are gorgeous, the chaos incredible. God is not a traffic cop. Galaxies, once safely hundreds of light years apart, collide into each other out there with a level of destruction beyond the scope of our minds. Wrote Chris Kraft, "We will migrate outbound." Google Sky shows you where we may go. A universe stunningly gorgeous, implacably dangerous – like us. We are, after all, its daughters and sons. We journey into chaos with the chaos that we are, bringing chaos in our wake, and we're the species to do it, the species that insists on inviting everything to the party every time – light and dark, good and evil, chaos and order, knowledge and ignorance, why and not, and why not?

There is no answer. Be that as it may, a mechanical representative of your foot is on Mars.

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