

When I was eleven years old, I made a pilgrimage to Huntsville, Alabama for a week of Space Camp. I realized almost immediately that I was a bit of an odd duck. Unlike most of the other campers, I didn't care much about the physics of jet propulsion or the biological effects of weightlessness. I went to Space Camp because I wanted to know what happened to the human soul when it left our atmosphere – when it became, for the first time, extra-terrestrial. Did John Glenn, alone in his orbiting capsule, stare out his window and witness God? Did Neil Armstrong, treading with his boot onto the silent, powdered moon, trespass onto some fierce heavenly kingdom?

I admired my more practical co-campers, those budding scientists and engineers who would go on to build the great rockets, design silver space suits, and map the elegant trajectories of planets and stars. The world needs many minds like theirs. Without logic and precision, humans would never have made it into space. We never would have kissed the white caps of the Himalayas, pierced the depths of , or navigated foreign and forbidding seas. But without a sense of wonder, would we ever have wanted to go?

Albert Einstein, whose physical theories laid much of the groundwork for space travel, famously noted, “Curiosity has its own reasons for existing ... Never lose a holy curiosity.” I imagine a certain urgency in his voice – he's not suggesting, he's pleading for us to go beyond terrestrial thoughts and ask probing, difficult, even painful questions of life.

As Stanford graduates, we've gained unparalleled intellectual guidance and training. The tools we possess – for communicating, experimenting and discerning, constitute a wonderful and heady gift. But they aren't the end of the story. As we end our time here, shocked at the volume of books read and problem sets frantically finished, I hope that we do not feel masterly or superhuman, but rather humbled at a world that contains so much – so many mysteries, so many secrets.

At Space Camp, I only began to prod at these secrets. There's a famous photograph in Huntsville that shows the Mercury Seven, America's first astronauts, lined up in flight suits, looking callow and cocky and clean-cut. All seven of them are grinning widely. All seven pairs of eyes show something like mystic fire. To strap oneself into a tiny, space-bound capsule in the name of simple human curiosity – were they not unlike saints?

At Stanford, I've looked for God on my own, in and out of the church, in and out of the classroom, precisely because my holy curiosity will not and perhaps cannot be extinguished. I'll never master that curiosity – not in this life. Real wonder and amazement and awe are not things we ever graduate from.

Of course, the “holy questions” are different for each of us, tailored to our individual minds, histories, and imaginations. Yet there's an essential human longing to pull back the curtain of the natural world, and ask: why me, why now, why this odd, sloping galaxy? This longing, Einstein affirms, “has its own reasons for existing.” Whatever the reason, it's our great license to engage that longing, to sometimes look the fool, to embarrass ourselves by asking unorthodox questions at Space Camp, in temples, classrooms, courtrooms and labs.

Let's go into the world and do the tangible work that's in front of us – let's build rockets. But in the midst of that good work, I do hope we'll have the humility to gasp, to shudder, to marvel and quake at the unanswerable and howl wild, holy questions at the sky.

Thank you.