

Cosmic Chatter

Thoughts on space and human exploration

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A BILLION-YEAR MONUMENT

More than four and a half thousand years ago, a square was marked in the desert a few kilometers west of the river Nile. It was a blueprint, writ large, for the construction of what would become mankind's most enduring achievement. For the next twenty years, large stone blocks would be hauled into place, one every five minutes, day or night. Six million tons of stone later, the greatest of the pyramids was complete.



(Image credit: Nina Aldin Thune)



(Image credit: NASA)

As Khufu, Pharaoh of the Fourth Dynasty, conceived of this incomparable endeavor, could he have possibly imagined the legacy his tomb would carry? Khufu's pyramid would remain the tallest manmade structure in the world for nearly four thousand years. When the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, next-oldest of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, was completed, this pyramid west of the Nile was already two thousand years old. It is the only Wonder that still remains.

But, it will not last forever. If the shifting sands of the desert do not claim it, wind and rain will eventually reduce this icon to dust. When confronted with this ultimate fate, I sometimes find it difficult not to despair. How futile seem the efforts of man when even our most audacious successes are but fleeting in the history of the cosmos.

I invariably brighten, however, with the recollection that the mark of humanity will, in fact, endure the eons. For, there is a place where the wind never blows, the ground never shakes, and water will never flow. As with Khufu's pyramid, placing a monument there took the focus of a great nation at the peak of its preeminence. It took the efforts, day and night, of nearly half a million people. More than a hundred million more footed the bill.

When compared to the great construction projects on Earth, the end result seems slight: a tiny metal frame, adorned by an even smaller plaque, and some boot prints in the dust. But, these boot prints were different than the untold number pressed into the Egyptian sand; they will last for a billion years.

"Here men from the planet Earth first set foot upon the Moon.

July 1969 A.D.

We came in peace for all mankind."

— Inscription on the Apollo 11 plaque

I think it's striking that in order to make our presence here on Earth known for eternity, we had to leave the planet entirely. Like a child looking to take her first steps as an adult, we had to leave home and strike out on our own. And like every child, we were and continue to be imperfect. Our reasons for leaving were impure. Like Khufu, we built our monument not out of charity, but in the grandest of self-aggrandizing spirit. And, yet also like that Pharaoh so long ago, the result transcended us. Because, as the years pass first in decades and then millennia, our motivations begin to fall away. What remains is the essence of the effort: that human need to do the undoable, to go where we have never been, to build that which will last forever.

 July 19, 2014 /  Morgan Rehnberg

 Moon, Apollo, United States, history

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