"Another Point of View"

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by F. Harris

Everyone at the center had considered Vernon's flight to be essentially routine. But it should not have required classified equipment and rumors had been common that he would be involved in testing some unidentified weapon system. If the flight had been successful, he would have achieved the distinction of piloting the longest manned space mission, although its duration would not have been significantly longer than the record of the Soviets. Of course, their launches always included at least two cosmonauts, but being alone should not have affected Vernon. In the investigation following his death, the medical technicians who had monitored his deprivation simulations agreed that he completed the trials without noticeable difficulty. They confirmed what had been written in the file reports: that he emerged from each trial apparently physically and psychologically healthy. Deprivation simulations had always been recognized as an accurate way to predict behavior under actual conditions. Anyone who could tolerate 30 days isolated in the total darkness of a deprivation tank with only minimal human contact should have been able to spend longer periods alone in space. No one could have foreseen that on this flight Vernon's mind would falter. Other men and women had faced the uncertainty and emptiness of space. The flight, the capsule's confinement, and the solitude should not have overwhelmed him. But something did, and our failure to discover his weakness led to his death. No one could have foreseen that this would doom all of us.

Although we continued to receive readings on his autonomous functions, his scheduled transmissions stopped. In the command room, the senior officers discussed contacting him. They argued about the immeasurably small amount of the capsule's electrical energy that would be wasted. I wonder now whether this argument was an indication of our sense of self-importance. The attempts to contact him were unanswered and the decision was made to transfer navigational control to the ground. Every contingency had been anticipated in the design of the capsule, except the malfunction of a human mind. As pilot of the craft, Vernon was aware that he had the capability of overriding us, and he restored control. I assume he acted as soon as he realized what we had done.

After 3 days of silence, we finally received a transmission from him, and we learned how far his mind had unraveled. "What am I doing here?" he asked. "Why am I here? What is the point of this?" The communication technicians refined the signals until the plaintive tone in his voice could be clearly heard.

The command room erupted with indignation, part wrath and part arrogance, at this threat to the mission. He was ordered to relinquish navigational control. The necessary 10 minutes passed slowly; there was no response. A minute later one of the senior officers, in frustration, grabbed a microphone to try to reason with Vernon. The officer spoke earnestly, appealing to his sense of duty. We received a signal that Vernon turned off his radio. Then a second signal indicated that he fired a booster prematurely. How could our future depend on this single irrational act, this moment of impulse?

After the ignition of the booster, we could no longer bring him down safely, even if he had not disabled ground control. The capsule began to drift slowly away from the solar plane. It still spirals upward today, moving in minutely decreasing arcs along a path that would look like a spring coiling to a point. One of the cults that has since arisen calls itself "God's Ear," supposedly because of the shape of the capsule's path. A physicist in Chicago calculated that the craft, without hindrance, will reach its apex in 53,000 years, where it will rotate forever.

In his next transmission Vernon sounded disconsolate. Nearly everyone now believes he was insane, but that opinion only makes it easier to dismiss what he said, which was somehow consistent with what he would do. Of course, I disagree with his remarks, but I don't think he was raving at the time. He again questioned the purpose of the flight. Then he spoke of the misery in the world, of the hate and the violence. He talked about children starving and the number of abortions performed every year. "We're killing each other for what?" he said. He sounded as though he may have been crying and had to compose himself. "This flight will give us a few years of superiority. Then the Russians will do the same thing and it will start all over again, with more money and more effort wasted, and on and on, until some maniac in power pushes the wrong button." There was silence and he said nothing more.

Two days passed. We were left to imagine the disintegration of his mind.

In what would be his last transmission, he said, "Forgive me."

The words did not seem directed at us. I don't
think that it was our forgiveness he was entreating. The members of God's Ear believe that Vernon met God in space, that he looked into the face of God and went mad.

Was the pistol on board another sign of our arrogance? In the early Sixties the press had railed against the idea of an astronaut with a weapon in his hand meeting an alien for the first time. In response, the pistol was justified as a means of self-defense. The real reason for its presence was never revealed: if a ship malfunctioned and an astronaut's death became a certainty, committing suicide would be considered acceptable, and using the pistol would be a manly way to do it. Is a man's death dismissable, but the way he dies worthy of concern?

The communication technicians processed images of the last transmission through the computer again and again, intensifying the signals, washing the interference, continuing even after everyone knew what the noise at the end was, and the sound of the gunshot hung in the air like the tolling of a bell on a still day.

The premature ignition of the booster made Vernon's death inevitable. His rescue was impossible and there was no way for him to save himself. In a sense, his death would have been a suicide regardless of how he died, whether by starvation, suffocation, exposure, or by his own hand. Vernon only finally finished it when he shot himself. Maybe our doom also became inevitable when he fired the booster. The members of God's Ear believe God punished us because of what happened, because Vernon spoke of man's failure and then killed himself in space. No one knows why, but from the exact moment of his death, not a single animal throughout the world, not a cat, or a dog, or a flea, has been born alive. Not even a human being.

The two events would remain unconnected until later. Panic struck every maternity ward. Their doctors desperately tried to determine the cause of the stillbirths, then quickly learned that the problem was widespread. Soon they would learn the actual enormity of the horror.

Grave newscasters, their manner belying the disbelief, shock, and hysteria that would follow, recounted details of the catastrophe. Scientists everywhere, the best minds in medicine and research, immediately began the futile search for the biological change that caused the creation of life to stop.

Vernon's death was overshadowed in the news until a comparison was made between the exact moment of the gunshot, the delay in transmission having been deducted, and the time at which the stillbirths began. That information was sadly confirmed by many hospitals. The two incidents, which had been only an unfortunate coincidence before the times were compared, occurred at the same instant. The connection between them would never be more than tenuous, but no contradiction or disproof appeared, and the conclusion became inescapable: Vernon's death caused all new life to stop. At the center we had morbidly wondered whether Vernon was dead by the time we heard the gunshot. We now knew that if his death caused the stillbirths, then he had died instantly. For us this was bitter knowledge.

In this country and abroad, reproach and demonstrations dwindled, their focus uncertain. Organized opposition was gradually replaced by the cults. Anyone who did not join one of these groups was reduced to apathy or private grief. I always assumed that the apocalypse, if realized, would be sudden. Who would have thought it would span a lifetime?

Insects were the first form of life whose absence was noticeable. Species of a higher order are now dying out, either at the end of their natural life spans, or as a result of the disruption of the food chain. Carcasses of birds and small animals are too common a sight to attract attention. Only plants will survive, although any species of plant that depends exclusively on animals for pollination, or is associated with an animal in a symbiotic relationship, may also disappear. When the last Galapagos tortoise dies in slightly less than 200 years, the unrelenting chronology of extinction will be complete.

I am amazed at how quickly vegetation thrives on abandoned land. Some suburban blocks have already been overgrown, except for the yards here and there that have been converted to miniature farms. How long will it be before forests and jungles reclaim the cities? With war, violence, and pollution gone, the earth will be a paradise of a sort, a Garden of Eden without Adam or Eve or serpent.

Hysteria is rampant, from the vast number of people who have committed suicide, to the cults with their bizarre birth rituals and their graveyard orgies. Even the mass chants of God's Ear, beneath their controlled intensity, seem potentially explosive.

Since the accumulation of wealth is now pointless, keeping order has not been a problem. Crime, including the evil of the sale of drugs, is almost nonexistent, and no one cares what users do to themselves with the drugs that are still available. Ownership of property is also now meaningless, and people leaving the cities have not been turned away from the land. At least in this country, food is as abundant as it was before. Of course, as soon as the rest of the animals are gone, we will be a nation of vegetarians.

Survival itself is not a problem, but the will to live is gone, having been replaced by guilt of an uncertain origin. We are numb, dazed, unable to accept this world or even resign ourselves to it. Daily life must have been somehow dependent on the promise of future life, for our days must have become no longer livable. We are the doomed, the walking dead.

Throughout history the innocent and the guilty
have suffered together, although I suppose the un-
born, the children who will never be, are the real in-
ocents. The members of God's Ear believe that God
causd this visitation because of what Vernon said,
and because he then killed himself in space. He spoke
of the suffering of children and the millions of abor-
tions performed every year. Maybe what has hap-
pended to the world is only a tragedy of a larger scale.

Newspapers eventually printed stories about the
good fortune of pregnant women who delivered just
before Vernon's death. Whether or not their off-
spring will feel fortunate in 70 years I don't know.
There is no hope, no consolation, in this world
without a future. Because Vernon killed himself, or
because we were unable to stop him, we have been
deprived of life. I think something has happened to
the soul. Some unknown link has been broken and the
collective soul has died. Plants will survive because
they lack a soul, whatever it is. God's Ear says that God
has taken the soul away.

My only solace is this link. Although life here will
end, maybe another link exists. Maybe there is a link
to an afterlife, even if we did somehow deserve God's
retribution.

It is ironic that people are much more conscien-
tious about birth control today than they were before
Vernon died. At least women who become pregnant
now know what to expect. But some of them don't
have abortions. Sustained by false hope, they carry
the lifeless fetuses to term, even though fetal
development is only a physiological reaction, like the
growth of a tumor. I have also heard rumors of unfor-
tunate experiments, Caesarian sections performed
prematurely, and in vitro fertilization with eggs and
sperm obtained before Vernon's death. The results
have always been the same. I can't speak for the scien-
tists who have been searching for the cause of this,
but most people have no hope for its reversal. I think
mass sterility would have been easier to bear.

Most tragic are the women who were pregnant
when Vernon died. Before any of this happened, I ex-
perienced the same devastation, the same un-
bearable grief. For many years I despised the words
"juvenile onslaught diabetes." My daughter had
been afflicted when she was eleven. I don't care what
the experts say, the psychologists and psychiatrists,
nothing could have prepared me to witness her suf-
fering. I used the training program as an excuse for my
absence.

When Carol’s eyesight failed, my wife read to her
constantly. My daughter became worse and finally
had to be admitted to the Children’s Specialized
Hospital. After her death, the nurses said that Carol’s
spirit, her love of life, was an inspiration to everyone
on the staff. They dedicated the hospital’s garden to
her memory. Carol had loved to be taken there in her
wheelchair to smell the flowers she could no longer
see.

My wife was unable to forgive me for my weak-
ness, my absence, and she divorced me. I don’t blame
her. Being divorced felt no more strange to me than
growing apart from the woman I had loved for all
those years. We had been incapable of conforting each
other. Years later, parents in similar circumstances
would join support groups. Now the whole world
should be a support group, but like my ex-wife and
me, people do not seem to be capable of providing
consolation to one another.

Vernon had had no family, which was not typical
of the others in the training program. We found out
that much more set him apart from the rest of us.
After the consequences of his death became ap-
parent, people came forward, people who had with-
held information about him during the original
investigation into his background.

We learned that he had been treated for depres-
sion while in college. Because of a concern for
protecting privacy, the school kept their records on
psychological counseling confidential. During
Vernon’s original background investigation, the Ad-
ministration of the college released only documents related to his physical health. If the rest had been uncovered, he never would have been accepted into the training program. At least a dozen cults that I know of originated as a result of that bit of fate alone, the confidential psychological records.

The details of his life would eventually become more well-known than those of anyone else in the history of the world. Nearly all of the information was inconsequential, but some of it provided insight into his character. He had gone to anti-war demonstrations while in college. He also had an interest in environmental issues and supported prohibiting the use of nuclear energy. A file report stated that Vernon had claimed to believe in God, but we found out that he had not attended church since his youth. I suppose anyone who had not been to church in over 30 years might have had a problem looking into the face of God.

Whether or not he was aware of the extent of his mental instability, we'll never know. He must have recognized that something was wrong. He must have felt some kind of negative emotion like depression, paranoia, or anxiety. Or suicidal impulses. I believe everyone at one time or another experiences emotions like these, at least to a slight degree. But I denied feeling them at all during the psychological evaluations for the next flight.

I was chosen to go.

The space program remains a microcosm of order. To understand what I am planning to do as Vernon's replacement, I think it is necessary to know the kind of man I am. The space program has given me fulfillment; the military has given my life meaning. I want to confront that stereotype directly, the military man, so that it can be put aside. I am conservative, patriotic, and religious. I admit to those characteristics, but I am not a zealot, a blind patriot. I consider myself a rational person, able to make an intelligent, moral judgment.

I believe in this country and its greatness. Of course, mistakes have been made. Human excesses and frailties have been justified in the name of national security. We have not always chosen the best allies. Instances of illegal acts and the subversion of rights have occurred. I am not trying to excuse those things. But the criticism that they generated should not have been perceived as a sign of the country's weakness. Our freedom permits this type of expression. I think the level of criticism is exaggerated. The press tends to exploit the sensational, and the young, the ones who protest, believe that rebelling against authority is fashionable.

Vernon must have believed that the government lacked a conscience. Diverting money spent for national defense could surely ease human suffering, but he should have realized that it would be at the expense of our way of life.

I want to be as honest as possible. I want my actions to be interpreted as those of a rational man. What I intend to do is not my destiny, it is only what I must do.

I am not afraid of death; everyone dies. The possibility of being maimed in war would terrify me, like any other man, but the moment of death does not. This is not heroism, not even bravery. It is only recognition that my turn to die has come. After I fire the booster prematurely, and the capsule drifts away along its spiral path, I'll read from the Bible. Then I'll talk on the radio about the things in which I believe. I want God to hear another point of view.

**chevying chase of the city dragon**

old worm, living only in despair's
dark crack caves' gloom,
feeding on drug lords' spawn: hopelessness --
comes from your rat's lair -- face my axe!

i know where you stalk for your victims,
near fate's stark rocks
scenting depression, anger and fear --
ousted roachbreath numbing logic.

hear me behind you, life-eating beast.
laughing blade sings
dark-burnished, hungry as quick lime
to slice-crush slime-cord of your life.

we know your secret wisdom-treasure,
finer than gold,
understand city dragon's secret:
"Mechanical is this cosmos,
it waits for our life-taming wills;
control power,
so humans can seize long-hid handles
and drive this yet unmastered brute."

gain no hope from this grey hunter's agings --
bards are iron-smiths.
city children now wield my forged blades
and my son shall heft bright laughter's sword.

-- Charles Rampp