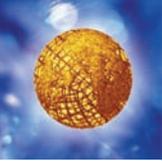


LADD MCPARTLAND; ALAN SHEPARD / NASA

Cosmic Activist

The Institute of Noetic Sciences celebrates the 35th anniversary of the lunar voyage of our founder, astronaut Edgar Mitchell, the sixth person to walk on the moon. Barbara McNeill, longtime editor-in-chief of Noetic Sciences Review and Shift magazine, spoke recently with Edgar and offers some insight into a man she worked with for many years.



BARBARA McNEILL

MOST PEOPLE KNOW EDGAR MITCHELL as a visionary. He is also a man of courage, most notably in his willingness to embrace the mysteries of the unknown—to venture outside the box not only in his exploration of outer space but also in his quest for self-knowledge and a deepened scientific understanding of the nature of consciousness.

After his walk on the moon, during the long journey back home to Earth, Edgar experienced an epiphany, an “ecstasy of unity,” as he describes it, with the cosmos. The nature of the universe was not as he had been taught!

My understanding of the distinct separateness and relative independence of movement of those cosmic bodies was shattered. I was overwhelmed with the sensation of physically and mentally extending out into the cosmos. The restraints and boundaries of flesh and bone fell away. I wondered if Stu and Alan [companion astronauts] were experiencing it as well . . . Somehow I never felt the urge to ask.

I questioned Edgar about his silence in that moment, and he replied that the visceral sensation was too private, too puzzling, too surprising, too unknown. He had been gifted with strong mental capacities but was not accustomed to powerful sensations and feelings. Edgar’s willingness to receive this potent experiential awareness mirrors his commitment to open inquiry in his scientific explorations, as well as in his personal quest.

Searching for further understanding of what had occurred, Edgar devoted the next several months to rigorous study of mystical writings from both Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. He was led to a Sanskrit description of *savikalpa samadhi* that he believed fit with his experience: *a moment in which an individual recognizes the separateness of all things yet understands that the separateness is but an illusion.* The both/and nature of this state of being helped Edgar shape what became the “dyadic” perspective that framed much of his subsequent work, according to which the fundamental attributes of nature are coupled or inextricably related, rather than separate or mutually exclusive. They are dyads—opposite sides of the same coin.

Edgar left NASA in 1972 to become fully involved in exploring the underlying structures of mind and the universe. Shortly thereafter he founded the Institute of

Noetic Sciences to provide multidisciplinary support for his ideas, bringing new approaches within modern science to bear on the study of mind and consciousness.

Edgar was troubled by the prevalence of a dualistic worldview in Western thought and science that separates mind and matter and that typically posits matter as the fundamental basis of reality. Fortunately, the advent of quantum physics provided scientific evidence that challenged this dualistic worldview. Experiments at the subatomic level revealed that (under certain conditions) one particle of matter will instantly “respond” when something happens to another particle, even though the two are separated from each other in space. Edgar interpreted that phenomenon as meaning that “awareness” is present at an elemental subatomic level. Building on this notion and affirming a learning, self-organizing principle in the universe, he proposed that awareness can evolve through many levels of complexity and that at an advanced stage of complexity, say, at the human level, an aptitude for self-reflective awareness begins to emerge. This includes the capacity to make conscious choices and to be held accountable for how actions affect others and their physical environment.

Given the deepening problems of today’s postindustrial society, issues of human consciousness, choice, and responsibility thus gain crucial relevance. Edgar, along with many others, maintains that human activity is on an exponential growth curve that cannot be sustained globally under current conditions. He believes that a paradigm shift is underway but cautions that the outcome is as yet unpredictable. Does humanity have the capacity to assume responsibility for species survival?

Thirty-five years ago Edgar committed his life to supporting a sustainable future and since then has worked actively to understand and promote the necessary collective shift in consciousness. We honor Edgar Mitchell on this 35th anniversary and are grateful not only for his visionary capacity but also for openly engaging that vision as it has unfolded through his own maturation and that of science. 

BARBARA McNEILL holds an MDiv in religion and psychology and a PhD in economics. In 1980 she joined the IONS staff and has also served on the IONS Board of Directors. For more information on Edgar Mitchell, go to www.edmitchellapollo14.com. You can also read his book, *The Way of the Explorer* (Putnam, 1996).

