Without Wonder, We Cease To Exist

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The quietest, most energy efficient race just rolled through the Midwest. Please forgive my double entendre, but as the American Solar Challenge (ASC) rolled through my area, nobody even knew it was happening and it had nothing to do with decibels. I was excited to get down to the checkpoint in Verona, WI and take pictures of the crowds and cars, but, when I arrived, it was hard to find a third person to make a crowd. That's an exaggeration; there was a small van of fans from the University of Michigan and a couple of workers from the ASC present.

You can blame a lack of proper PR, but the truth of the matter is that people are only interested in seeing a quick glimpse of these cars. The thrill ends on the road. Commuters are happy to honk and wave at college students driving these undersized, spaceship-like cars, but they don't really care what the purpose is.

I know I'm preaching to the choir at this point, but where has our enthusiasm for innovation gone? It is a frightening day and age when kids are more interested in becoming Snookie than an astronaut. This isn't to speak for all, as programs like FIRST and the ASC have remained steadfast and continue to inspire the next generation, but it can't be denied that there is a blanketing deficiency in the progression of discovery in the United States.

This is painfully apparent in the constant threats to the budgets of programs like NASA. When an organization that has been responsible for many of the most profound scientific and engineering innovations in the world's history has to go to the government with hat-in-hand to beg for more money, we are on a decline as a country. The reality is that NASA only receives fractions of a penny on the dollar of our national budget, and yet they have continued to innovate. Why are we letting politicians – who care little about innovation beyond their election cycle – cut the budget for a program that should be one of our most prized contributions to the world.
Often, the argument against NASA is something along the lines of: "Why should we fund stuff up there when we have all kinds of problems we can fund down here?" There is no direct answer to this question. We do have many problems here on Earth, but in the long-range understanding of human existence, we have to understand what problems are more important. Beyond that, most people don't realize that research performed at NASA stretches far beyond astronauts drinking gravity-free Tang. I'm paraphrasing, but Neil deGrasse Tyson, renowned astrophysicist and STEM spokesperson, has said that the decline in our sense of wonder, and our ambition to poke at things we don't understand, will be the tipping point to the end of our culture. Without our natural sense of wonder, we will eventually cease to exist.

So what does all this have to do with my disappointment in the turnout for a solar car race? The absence of a crowd is testament to the fact that our society lacks the

interest to even support innovation, let alone innovate themselves. We need to keep our eyes on the distant future, not just the end of the next fiscal year. It's inspiring to see private companies like SpaceX and MarsOne jump on the space exploration bandwagon (if you can even call it a bandwagon, more like an old, beat-up VW Beatle at this point), but that doesn't mean we can stop trying. Collaboration with these interested parties is the next step in the exploration of our universe, and support for organizations like the ASC and FIRST are vital to raising enlightened generations. We need to inspire critical thinking and exploration, rather than push for a higher quota or sales mark. The United States is a nation of supposed capitalists, but it is easy to be a businessman; we need inventors to take over the capitalist world again. Innovative stock techniques and business development strategies are not the key to our future. The key is a kid blowing up his Legos in an attempt to make them fly.

What's your take on the need for NASA and our developing society?
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