

# MY TIME AS AN ASTRONAUT HAS RE-AFFIRMED MY BELIEF IN GOD



Says NASA astronaut Bernard A Harris Jr, who's had the privilege to get a God's eye view of the universe. In Hyderabad for a conference, Harris shares his experiences and his role in pushing education, health and wealth for the less privileged

Sarah Salvadore

**Did you always want to be an astronaut? What pushed you towards it?**

I wanted to be an astronaut since I was about 13. This was shortly after the first humans landed on the Moon in 1969. Watching them do something that had never been done before was the inspiration for me. With the support of my family, particularly my mother, I found the will and the courage to pursue my dream.

**You were the first African American astronaut to perform an extra-vehicular activity...**

My first flight was STS-55, on board the Space Shuttle Columbia in 1993. It was a joint spacelab mission with Germany. We conducted 91 different in-flight experiments in an orbiting laboratory called SpaceLab D-2.

**How was the feeling, when you spacewalked for the first time?**

Flying into space for the first time was an exciting experience! But to actually go outside the spaceship while orbiting the Earth at 17,500 miles per hour

(28,000 km per hour), is a different kind of an experience. You are outside where you can see the crew in the ship, the Earth and the Milky Way Galaxy in its entirety! It was a God's eye view.

**What is life like, aboard a spacecraft?**

Each mission has its own objectives that determine the activities on board. My first mission was STS-55, totally dedicated to science research. The second, STS-63 on Space Shuttle Discovery, had a variety of activity from research, a spacewalk and a visit to the MIR, space station of the Russian Space Agency. The thing that complicates life in space is the lack of gravity.

**Don't you think the education system today is skewed in favour of the well-off? How do you think this imbalance can be changed?**

As an astronaut, I think that I have two missions: One that involves my travel into space and the activities that I do while there. I call this my 'Extraterrestrial Mission'. The second is my 'Terrestrial Mission', that is my mission

that uses the knowledge and influence of space travel to make a difference in the world. It is this mission that I treasure the most, particularly when it comes to investing in our youth. My foundation is a vehicle to make a difference and to invest in individuals and communities. I believe that technology is the great equaliser, it can be used to reach those with limited opportunities. At our foundation, we are incorporating educational tools to reach children in the inner cities. These same tools can be utilised around the world. Education is the key to fulfilling dreams and can be the launching pad for any community. We must ensure that it is available to all.

**In India, the most popular career choices are between becoming a doctor, engineer or an MBA graduate.**

In the 21st century, technology drives everything that we do around the world. So, any education that involves STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), will set you on the right path to success.

**In most Indian families, academics get the maximum importance. So much so that extra-curricular activities are shunned. Apart from being an astronaut, you are a trained pilot and a scuba diver. How important is it to have multiple interests and be able to multi-task well?**

It is the expansion of knowledge that is key to achievement and success. Academics is just one way to obtain knowledge and gain the skills necessary for success. We are born with certain abilities and we acquire the rest. It is important to utilise all of your talents, such as music, sports and art. The world is in need of knowledgeable people to lead. In order to take advantage of all of your abilities, being able to multi-task is a good skillset to have.

**There are a lot of Indian minds at NASA...**

Indeed. And I have worked with a number of incredibly talented scientists, engineers and astronauts of Indian descent.

**Carl Sagan had said astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. How much do you agree with this?**

My time as an astronaut has re-affirmed my belief in god. Traveling in space allows you to have a total picture of the universe and our place in it.

**How has your trip to India been?**

We have had a wonderful time visiting the country, which began at the TIE conference in Kerala and now here in Hyderabad. We are looking forward to exploring the Hyderabad region of this beautiful country.

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