

Godspeed, Columbia
By
Larry Simoneaux

Some small thing broke.

Some small piece let go.

Some small part in an extremely complex machine malfunctioned.

It happens in any machine made by the hands of man. They aren't perfect. They never will be. Eventually, no matter how well built or how well maintained, something will go wrong and start a chain of events.

At twelve-thousand-miles an hour and at well over two hundred thousand feet up, when something breaks, it can be serious and the chain of events it starts can quickly lead to disaster.

Last Saturday, that disaster happened. It took the lives of seven astronauts and destroyed the space shuttle Columbia.

Now, we'll go out, find the pieces, and we'll put them together in some hangar.

Then, the experts will study them from a hundred different angles with a hundred different theories and, eventually, those pieces will give up their secret and tell us the story.

We'll figure out what part broke. We'll see what piece let go. We'll find what needs to be changed and we'll see what needs to be stronger.

Then, we'll know how to do it better and we'll fix it and we'll go back into space. Because it's what we - as a race - do.

We're humans. By nature, we're a curious species. Our history shows that we've always had a yen for exploration - an urge to leave what we know in order to explore the places we don't know.

We look up from where we are and wonder what's across the next river or over the next mountain or on the other side of a great sea. We've been doing this since we gathered in caves and sat around campfires in the dim mists of history.

It's what makes us better.

Because finding out what's beyond the known takes courage and drive and confidence. It takes a belief that such a thing can be done and an abiding faith that we will be better for having done it.

Too, as a race, we've always found those among us who were willing to go. The ones in whom the urge to seek and find is so strong that they willingly and, even, cheerfully ignore the dangers present whenever we venture into the unknown.

These individuals are like the rest of us but different in a special way. They are restless and eager. They are bright and questioning. They are impatient with the present and eager for the

future. They see challenge and rise to face it. They put aside fears and questions and doubts and willingly lead us to places we'd not have gone otherwise.

But there is always a price to be paid because, for every great achievement, there is also tragedy.

On every path into the unknown, there stand markers attesting to the ones who carved the way. The continents and oceans of our world have already exacted their price. The names of the explorers who conquered them are written in history. Now, we're pushing back the boundaries of space and we're finding that it is an inherently dangerous undertaking.

That's because we are working with forces and power and speed that most of us cannot even comprehend. We are entering a harsh and unforgiving environment. But we continue because it's in our nature to look up at the night sky, marvel at its expanse, and wonder what's beyond our world.

And, so, we'll continue to carve our path into space. It will lead us to the places we do not know and discoveries of which we have yet to dream. Already, though, there are markers on that path. They're testaments to those who've led the way. Today, February 1, 2003, we placed another marker and engraved seven names on it.

Mission Commander Rick Husband, Pilot William McCool, Payload Commander Michael Anderson, Mission Specialist David Brown, Mission Specialists Laurel Clark and Indian-born Kalpana Chawla, and Payload Specialist Ilan Ramona, an Israeli astronaut whose mother was a Holocaust survivor from the Auschwitz concentration camp.

They were among the best of us.

They carried our dreams.

And now they're gone.

For us all.

Godspeed, Columbia.

Godspeed.

(Larry Simoneaux is a freelance writer living in Edmonds, WA. Comments can be sent to larrysim@att.net)