

Are Things Really That Bad?

Let's be honest. If not for the 2,000-pound Curiosity Rover landing flawlessly on Mars, after a voyage of 350 million miles, and the 440 scientists at 33 research centers around the world who mapped the rest of our DNA, the year would have been a colossal letdown.

Watching those scientists, engineers and technicians at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory high-fiving and hugging each other was a treat. At least someone had something to celebrate. And the rest of us? Compared to those space explorers, we all seem depressed.

Think about it. For more than a year pessimists bemoaned Europe's failure to make a deal on its debt, Congress's inability to reach a compromise, China's looming slowdown and tensions in the Persian Gulf. And while we were all bellyaching, a group of earthlings lowered a six-wheeled, car-sized laboratory onto the surface of Mars.

Now, if you were pushing a shopping cart through a supermarket in Pasadena, Calif., and bumped into one of those scientists, you probably would not know it. Judging from the pictures, they look like everyone else. As individuals, they are like any other bunch of smart people. But as a group they are remarkable. And, if you think about it, in a way, we are all part of that group.

Theirs was not a journey that took five years to plan and execute. It took all of human history. It took equations written by Newton 350 years ago, based on principles pondered by Archimedes, Pythagoras and their predecessors. It required a painstaking accumulation of evidence and knowledge from men and women around the world.

The team itself was global, with members originally from every continent except Antarctica. A couple of these experts started on the project and died before its completion. Others

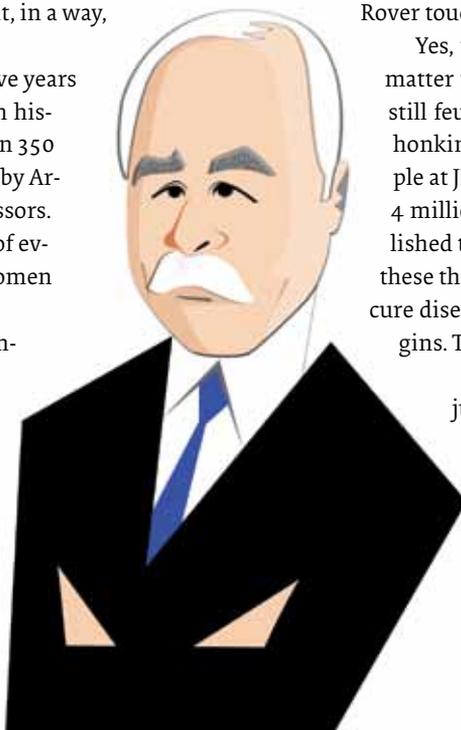
joined the effort in the middle or near the end. Some team members burned with a strong desire to investigate space from their youth. Others, like Adam Steltzner, who conceived the Sky Crane landing system for getting onto Mars, took a rather circuitous route.

The point is, the people who sent that craft into space and slowed it down from 17,000 miles an hour to a few feet per second, (see our diagram in this issue) were related to us in a six-degrees-of-separation way. All of us. And yet, while they were high-fiving each other, too many of us were wracked with doubt about almost everything political and economic.

So, you have to ask, are things really that bad? I suppose if you're living in countries where bombs are falling, they are. But in the last decade, 300 million people joined the middle class in China and India, with tens of millions more on their way. Some of these people, especially kids, watched the Rover touch down and were inspired.

Yes, we seem to be stuck in traffic a lot, no matter where we live. And yes, politicians are still feuding. But while we listen to all those honking horns, we might think about the people at JPL, or the 440 researchers who mapped 4 million DNA switches in our cells and published the results last summer. They didn't do these things just for the fun of it. They did it to cure disease, stretch our minds, ponder our origins. They did it for us.

These are remarkable times. And, it could just be that the world has not lost its way, but is in the midst of finding it. Think about where we started.



Robert Risko