

Coming Full Circle

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One might say that I was destined in some way to be working in aerospace at this point in my career. And to be honest, it does not surprise me that my life journey has led me to AIAA. From the time I was young, I took great pleasure in building plastic model airplanes and rockets. In fact, I built so many models that I had to give most of them away as gifts, just to maintain the necessary space in my bedroom to build more of them.

These fond memories also bring me back to the hazy and grainy pictures of man's first steps on the moon. I can remember watching this historic event with my mother and father on a black and white television, listening and watching but not fully understanding or comprehending this event's significance or the culmination of technical, scientific and engineering achievement that made it all possible until much later in life.

In a world of uncertainty, I am certain about one thing: that I am the product of my past and a makeup of the life experiences that have led me to where I am today. My world-view is shaped by my unique upbringing, having had the benefit of being the first son of an Italian father and an American mother. I had the good fortune to be raised bi-culturally and bi-nationally, living both in Italy and the USA. I have also combined what I feel to be the best of both worlds, taking important life-lessons from both cultures and weaving them into a single, unique fabric that has guided me in this great journey of life.

My past and those experiences have had a profound impact upon that voyage, leading me throughout my university years to be a liberal arts double-major from the College of the Holy Cross with a degree in International Affairs and Modern Foreign Languages. During those years, I had a keen interest in diplomacy, and upon graduation in 1987, set off to Washington, DC to pursue a career as a diplomat at the U.S. Department of State.

After having spent five years working as a diplomat, a unique opportunity presented itself to become an international trade lobbyist in 1992, working for the American Council of Engineering Companies in Washington, DC as their Director for International Affairs. In this fast-paced environment, I was able to explore my

interest in the legislative process and help move foreign assistance legislation through Congress, working with a variety of Congressmen, US engineering companies, and other coalition partners to support US-financed infrastructure projects in developing nations until 1998.

Throughout these years and prior to joining AIAA, it was important to me as a professional to combine that work-related experience with theoretical academic balance to underpin my ability to approach and solve problems using unconventional and creative approaches. In 1992, I completed a Masters in Public Administration (MPA), only to be joined by a Masters in International Trade and Finance in 1997. It is with this formal educational, professional and personal background that I began my tenure at AIAA in 1998.

In 1998, my life started to come full circle in the respect that I began to re-introduce myself to those important childhood interests and pursue my fascination with aviation and space. This was a surprisingly invigorating experience and somewhat humbling, as I would come to know and work side-by-side with the very people whose job it is to make the seemingly impossible, possible. I remain in awe today as much as I did when I first started to make those model airplanes and rockets, but now, for completely different reasons.

Aerospace engineers are impressive people. Although I am not one myself, I enjoy being able to contribute my small part to advancing their interests and their profession through dialogue, shared professional responsibility and outreach to that organized technical community in other nations who are committed to the same values. My work at AIAA focuses on these tenets, and it is my hope that I continue to reinvent and keep relevant this great nexus between government, academia and industry to continue to keep the profession on the cutting edge of discovery through the creation of programs, symposia and other means, in order that that knowledge be shared and disseminated as needed.

After all, these are the people that turn seemingly impossible dreams into a pedestrian reality. And they make it all look so simple; so effortless. How often does the general public take for granted a shuttle launch? I would say that up until recently, very often, until we are cruelly reminded of the dangers that astronauts face only when disaster claims their lives, and then we are once again humbled and understand just how technically complex and sophisticated these – and all - missions are.

But the list goes on...how about a plane that can travel 13,000 miles without making a stop to refuel? How often do we consider the odds of successfully navigating a spacecraft to have impact with a meteor just to explore the makeup of that comet? How about landing two "rovers" on Mars, each of which has outlived their respective life expectancies, or exploring the composition of the rings of Saturn, or Jupiter's moon, or developing a manned international space

station to support scientific and other experiments in zero gravity? Better yet, how about a telescope that can capture the birth or death of a star?

As we move forward on the endless road of discovery both of the solar systems around us and within us, I cannot help but to be philosophical just long enough to wonder whether the boy that I once was would be proud of the educational and professional choices made - and accomplishments realized - by the man he would soon become. Perhaps that man would not have any direct involvement in *creating* any of those modern miracles, but he might be more closely associated with them than the boy would have ever imagined. Yes, these are heroic people doing impossible things. They are changing our world and because of it, both the boy and the man are eternally grateful.

So, with this, I pay tribute to all of you. You, the aerospace engineer, who inspired the imagination of a boy who became a man, only to discover that he was still a boy. What greater gift is there and what greater proof do you need than the plastic model airplanes and rockets that still populate my shelves to this day?

