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James R. Hansen

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A RELUCTANT ICON

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A RELUCTANT ICON

Letters to
Neil Armstrong

JAMES R. HANSEN

Purdue University Press
West Lafayette, Indiana

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The majority of the letters featured in this volume are from the Neil A. Armstrong papers in the Barron Hilton Flight and Space Exploration Archives, Purdue University Archives and Special Collections.
Condolence letters courtesy of Carol Armstrong.

“A great man is always willing to be little.”

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

I dedicate this book to those rare men and women of the world who are naturally “little,” achieve greatness, and always stay true to what they are. For they are the giants of our humankind.

Neil Armstrong
APOLLO 11

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PREFACE

Why do I want to publish yet another book about Neil Armstrong? It is a fair question and one that I have already been asked by several colleagues and friends while preparing this second book of letters to Neil Armstrong for Purdue University Press. It is likely a question to be asked again. So let me explain.

In 2005 I published *First Man: The Life of Neil A. Armstrong*, intending the book to stand for a long time as the definitive account of Armstrong's life. *First Man* seemed definitive enough: 770 pages, including 64 pages of endnotes and a 20-page bibliography, based on fifty-five hours of exclusive one-on-one personal interviews with Armstrong in his suburban Cincinnati home. Overall, I conducted oral history interviews with over a hundred different people and corresponded by letter, email, and telephone with several dozen more. Along the way I learned everything I could about Neil—from family members (his sister, June; brother, Dean; wives, Janet and Carol; and sons, Rick and Mark); from numerous schoolmates from grade school, high school, and college; from several of his fellow naval aviators, test pilots, astronauts, and NASA officials; from friends, both casual and close; from his associates during his post-NASA years at the University of Cincinnati and those after he entered corporate business; and from miscellaneous others whose lives intersected with Neil's. Furthermore, Neil himself had done something that made *First Man* rather definitive—he authorized it.

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When Neil died at age eighty-two on August 25, 2012, I wrote a new preface for *First Man*, one that addressed his death and added a few of my thoughts on the meaning of his life as I understood it as a historian, a biographer, and someone who had gotten to know him rather well. The publisher, Simon and Schuster, placed the new preface at the front of the original 2005 book and issued it as a second edition. However, not until the opportunity came along to publish a third edition in the summer of 2018, in conjunction with the premiere of the Damien Chazelle–directed film *First Man*, adapted from my book, did I have the chance to extend the biography to cover the last seven years of Neil’s life, from 2005 to 2012, including a lengthy discussion of his death and legacy.

One might think that, at that point, I would have judged my work on Armstrong to be truly definitive. But I did not. Having thought, written, lectured, and conversed about Neil’s life for seventeen years, since beginning my research for *First Man* in 2001, I had not tired of learning about him, asking new questions about his life, hearing new stories from people who knew him, and finding new source materials. “Definitive,” I found, was relative. There was more to know, learn, and discover about Neil Armstrong, just as there always is about historical subjects.

The biggest gap in my knowledge about Armstrong derived from the fact that I had not had significant access to Neil’s *correspondence* while researching *First Man*. To be sure, I had far greater access to Neil’s papers than any other historian ever had. Virtually no scholar had ever had any entry to his private collection of papers, except for perhaps a few items here and there that Neil might have shared with a space historian or two over the years. Still, my access was itself quite limited. Neil had not given me direct access to his files, stored as they were in cabinets within his home as well as in rented storage units in commercial buildings in Lebanon, Ohio, just north of Cincinnati, where Neil had lived with his family on a farm since leaving NASA in 1971. (He would live on that farm by himself starting in 1990, when his first wife, Janet, separated from him and moved to their vacation home in Utah, until 1994 when Neil and Janet divorced. Later that same year he married Carol Held Knight, after which he and Carol built a home in the Cincinnati suburb of Indian Hill on the site of the home where Carol had lived with her first husband, who had been killed a few years earlier in a private airplane accident in Florida.)

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Naturally, I would have preferred that Neil give me *carte blanche* to go freely into his papers as I saw fit rather than to wait for him to show me what he had selected for me to see after I asked him questions about specific subject matter. But Neil would never have gone for that, though I did ask him for that freedom, saying to him that if he would “let me do my thing” he would not have to be driving—multiple times—the forty-eight-mile round-trip up Interstate 71 from Indian Hill to downtown Lebanon to search through dozens of dusty boxes until he found precisely the files he felt he needed to answer my questions. (Typically Neil made those trips in the days right before I would arrive in Cincinnati for a round of interviews with him, heading into his files in response to written questions I had emailed to him some two to three weeks earlier.) Needless to say, he did not always find exactly what he was looking for in his boxes, and I was not always satisfied with what I got to see. Neil was one heck of an engineer, but he was not a historian, and I often wondered what nuggets remained in those boxes that Neil ignored, passed over, or overlooked, him not knowing that something he might regard as trivial, insignificant, or meaningless could have been, from my training and perspective, wonderfully insightful and important.

In the years following the original publication of *First Man*, Neil bequeathed his papers to the archives at Purdue University, his alma mater. But the process of actually getting them to West Lafayette had only started when he died in August 2012. The task of getting them there fell to Carol Armstrong, his widow. As her grief for the loss of her husband was extremely deep and profound, it was many months before Carol was able to go through Neil’s things and get the appropriate materials to Purdue. The first time I saw his collection of papers was when I first visited the Purdue archives in the summer of 2015. For the next three years I spent a good part of my summer in the archives, where, for the first time, I had complete access to Neil’s papers.

It was his correspondence—the tens of thousands of personal letters, most of them fan mail written to Neil from men and women, boys and girls, of all ages, from all around the world, along with several thousand of his replies, nearly all of them from the years following Apollo 11—that most fascinated me. For as interested as I was in learning more details of his biography, it was the iconography and myth surrounding Armstrong—that is, the different meanings that society and culture over the years had projected

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onto him as a global icon and symbol, not just of America but of all humankind—that became the major focus of my research.

Formally, the Neil A. Armstrong papers became part of the Barron Hilton Flight and Space Exploration Archives, which had been established in 2011, a year before Neil's death, with generous support from Mr. Barron Hilton and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, based on a gift of \$2 million. With that money, Purdue created a special collection within its Archives and Special Collections for "the papers of individuals such as pilots, astronauts, engineers, researchers, and others," especially those with Purdue connections that could offer "original, rare, and unique materials" related to the history of flight and space exploration.¹

The focus on the history of flight at Purdue is not new. It dates back to 1940 when the university library received a gift of aviator Amelia Earhart's papers from her husband, George Palmer Putnam (1887–1950). From 1935 until her mysterious disappearance over the Pacific Ocean in July 1937, Earhart had served as a Purdue career counselor and adviser to the campus's Department of Aeronautics. Although assorted Earhart papers would ultimately come to rest in a few other archives (including the National Archives and Harvard University), the collection at Purdue stands as the largest compilation of Earhart-related papers, memorabilia, and artifacts anywhere in the world. Building on that base, Purdue in the decades following the Earhart gift continued to grow its history of flight collections. But no acquisition compared in significance to the arrival of the papers belonging to Armstrong.

At the time Neil announced he was giving his papers to Purdue, so too did fellow Apollo astronaut and long-time friend and fellow Purdue graduate Eugene A. Cernan (1934–2017), the last man on the Moon. Along with Armstrong, Cernan had cochaired two of the largest fundraising campaigns in Purdue history, totaling nearly two billion dollars by the early 2000s. Soon to follow suit were a number of other Purdue air and space notables, including several of the twenty-three (and counting) astronauts that Purdue has produced over the years. Into the Flight and Space Exploration Archives went the papers of Roy D. Bridges Jr. (b. 1943), who piloted the Spacelab-2 mission (STS-51F) in 1985 and later became director of NASA's Kennedy Space Center and Langley Research Center; Mark N. Brown (b. 1951), who served as a missions specialist on STS-28 in 1989 and was also a crew member on STS-48 in 1991; Mary L. Cleave (b. 1947), who flew two shuttle missions (STS-61-B and

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STS-30) and served from 2004 to 2007 as NASA associate administrator for the Science Mission Directorate; Dave Leestma (b. 1949), a veteran of three shuttle flights from 1984 to 1992, logging over 532 hours in space; William R. Pogue (1930–2014), who served as a member of support crews for Apollos 7, 11, and 14 and was the pilot of Skylab 4, the third and final visit to the Skylab orbital workshop, during which he stayed in space for over eighty-four days from November 1973 to February 1974, the longest crewed flight to that date; Kenneth S. Reightler Jr. (b. 1951), who piloted STS-48 in 1991 and STS-60 in 1994, the latter being the first joint U.S./Russian shuttle mission; Jerry L. Ross (b. 1948), who set records with seven shuttle missions and nine spacewalks from 1985 to 2002; Pierre J. Thuot (b. 1955), a veteran of three shuttle missions who spent more than 650 hours in space, including three spacewalks; Janice E. Voss (1956–2012), who set a record for female astronauts with five space spaceflights; and Donald E. Williams (1942–2016), who piloted STS-51D *Discovery* in 1985 and STS-34 *Atlantis* in 1989.

These diverse collections, and others donated both before and after Neil's bequest, will keep historians and other researchers busy in the Barron Hilton Archives for decades to come. But Armstrong's collection will always be the star attraction, for "Neil is there" in the more than 450 boxes of documents he left to his university—in his reports, coursework, research notes, working papers and subject files, notebooks, and training materials; in his scrapbooks, log books, writings, speeches, photographs, drawings, blueprints, and newspaper clippings; and, most vibrantly, in his correspondence.

Samples from Neil's correspondence, particularly his fan mail, provide the essence of *Dear Neil Armstrong: Letters to the First Man on the Moon from All Mankind*, published in October 2019, as well as this new book, *A Reluctant Icon: Letters to Neil Armstrong*. The contents of the first book are organized into the following chapters:

First Words: Mostly letters to Neil in which people, some he knew and some he did not, offered their thoughts on what he should say when he first stepped onto the Moon.

Congratulations and Welcome Home: Telegrams, notes, and letters sent to Armstrong and his Apollo 11 crewmates, Buzz Aldrin and Mike Collins, immediately after completion of their successful lunar mission.

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The Soviets: A surprising number of well-wishing telegrams and letters sent to Armstrong by people in the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc countries, including a number of cosmonauts and Soviet engineers and scientists.

For All Mankind: Being the first man on the Moon instantly made Neil a global icon, as demonstrated by letters written to him in the years following Apollo 11 from all around the world, many of them from children.

From All America: Although a global icon, Armstrong was a quintessential American hero, one that attracted (mostly) adoring letters from thousands of fellow citizens, young and old.

Reluctantly Famous: Neil did everything he could to stay out of the public glare, but, as is clear in letter after letter from voluminous mail, the fame of being the First Man on the Moon was inescapable.

The Principled Citizen: Letters asking Neil for all manner and degree of participation and support in contemporary civic and business affairs of his city and state.

Understood in their entirety, the letters in *Dear Neil Armstrong*—some 350 of them—shed new light not just on Armstrong's life and his personal views and opinions but even more so on how society and culture projected different meanings of their own making onto the man who was first to step onto another world.

The letters in the first book only scratched the surface of the Armstrong iconography. My original idea was to publish a much larger book with twice as many letters, but such a book would have been unwieldy. So, with the guidance of the Purdue University Press, the decision was made to divide my preliminary book in half and publish a second book of letters sometime in the year that followed the publication of the first book. That second book would focus on other major themes in the larger life story of the First Man: religion and belief; anger, disappointment, and disillusionment (expressed by fans and critics); quacks, conspiracy theorists, and UFOlogists; fellow astronauts and the world of flight; the corporate world; celebrities, stars, and notables; and last messages and letters of condolence. As with the first book, I have provided a great deal of context and commentary for the letters, thereby giving readers a better understanding of who wrote the letters, what relationship the letter writer may have had

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with Neil, if any, and how Neil responded to the letters, in those cases when he did, or had his secretaries and assistants do so on his behalf. (Also, as with the first book, original spellings and punctuation have been preserved.) It is my hope that taken together the two books will provide a host of fascinating insights into the public and private worlds of the man who willingly took that first giant leap onto lunar soil, but who in doing so perforce stepped, with great reluctance, into the public eye, not just for a few years but for the rest of his life.

As hard as it has been to pare down the letters from the some 75,000 stored in the Purdue archives to the contents of these two books, I cannot promise that someday there won't be a third book of Armstrong letters, because almost every letter to Neil in the Purdue archives, and every reply from him, offers interesting new insights into who he was, and even more so into who *we* were, in terms of what we thought about our hero and what we wanted from him.

What do I hope to accomplish with these books? Foremost, I hope that people around the world, today and in the future, will better understand and appreciate Neil Armstrong not just as a global icon who stepped down off a ladder and onto the Moon but as a flesh-and-blood human being with faults, defects, and limitations just like the rest of us. I also hope that people will move away from the many myths and common misunderstandings plaguing the historical memory of Neil Armstrong—primarily that Neil, in the years after Apollo 11, became an ultra-private, totally closed off, near-reclusive man. The letters in the two books show that Neil was hardly any of those things. On the contrary, he was very engaged in the world around him, though he had his own particular ways and standards of how he would deal with society and culture.

I also hope people will stop from time to time to think *Shame on us*. Shame on us for not showing more consideration toward our celebrities and great public figures. Day in and day out, we just ask way too much of them.

There was nothing in the letters to Neil, or from Neil, that made me change my basic understanding of him as I presented it in *First Man*. What they did was add depth, richness, and resonance to everything I had already come to understand about Neil as a person and as an icon.

Finally, I want to again sincerely thank the following individuals at Purdue University for all they have done to make these two books of letters to Neil a reality: Tracy Grimm, associate head of Archives and

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Special Collections and the Barron Hilton Archivist for Flight and Space Exploration; Sammie Morris, Purdue university archivist and head of Archives and Special Collections; Katherine Purple, editorial, design, and production manager at the Purdue University Press; Kelley Kimm, PUP senior production editor; Bryan Shaffer, PUP sales and marketing manager; Chris Brannan, PUP graphic designer; and Justin Race, the director of the Purdue University Press. Without their dedication and hard work, the two books could not have been produced as beautifully as they are.

I owe a very special thanks to Carol Armstrong, Neil's widow. While this second book of letters was in production, Carol sent me a number of the condolence letters she received following Neil's death in August 2012. I had asked her earlier if she might share a few of these letters for publication in this second book. It was a lot to ask, and I understood completely when Carol told me that going back through those letters and cards would just be too painful for her. It is a testimony to her profound strength of character and her love for Neil that she ultimately chose to share a selection of those letters. Naturally, before I could include those letters in this book, I needed to ask permission of those great friends of Neil's and Carol's who had offered their sympathies, prayers, love, and friendship in these cards and letters. Virtually all of them that I contacted granted their permission. In the last chapter of this book, you will see how extraordinarily special these letters are, and how they present such a wonderful closing testimony to how people felt about Neil, especially those who were lucky enough to know him well.

Neil would be embarrassed by all the attention, as he always was. But in the service of his memory, and what he meant to the world, then and now, the record of his life deserves to be as complete as we can possibly make it.

James R. Hansen
Auburn, Alabama
March 2020

1

RELIGION AND BELIEF

An event as epochal as the first human being stepping on to another world was bound to be enveloped in religious projections, interpretations, and symbolism. Every religion of the world, in one way or another, endeavored to fold the mission of Apollo 11 into its metanarrative—into its belief system and holy stories, thereby linking past, present, and future into the eternal cosmic experiences of humankind.

No religion engaged and translated the transcendent significance of the first Moon landing more than Christianity. In days and weeks surrounding the mission, Christian leaders around the world gave voice to the idea that humankind's trip to the Moon was a "pilgrimage," a "spiritual quest," and that at the heart of all flying, all space exploration, was a religious truth. NASA's master rocketeer and builder of the Saturn V, Dr. Wernher von Braun, who had converted to Evangelical Christianity shortly after coming to the United States after World War II, expressed the sentiment in 1969 for the scientific and technical community: "Astronomy and space exploration are teaching us that the good Lord is a much greater Lord, and Master of a greater kingdom. The fact that Christ carried out his mission on Earth does not limit his validity for a greater environment. It could very well be that the Lord would send his Son to other worlds, taking whatever steps are necessary to bring the Truth to His Creation." Pope Paul VI expressed it for the Catholic world, referring to the Moon landing as "the ecstasy of this prophetic day."²

The morning Apollo 11 launched, Reverend Herman Weber gave voice to it for Neil's mother and father, Viola and Stephen Armstrong, and for all American evangelicals from his pulpit in Wapakoneta's St. Paul United Church of Christ: "As Thou hast guided our astronauts in previous flights, so guide, we pray, Neil, the esteemed son of our proud community, and his partners, Buzz and Michael, and all others who are involved in this righteous Lunar flight in every station." In a speech to his congregation days after the Moon landing, a minister in Iowa wrote a letter to Viola Armstrong in which he posited, "Could the external presence of Neil Armstrong, the courageous leader, be a symbol of the presence within of the strong arm of the Lord? . . . Their place was the Moon, their ship was the Eagle, which landed on a firm rock at a place called Tranquility Base. Could there possibly be a rock of ages which is a base for all tranquility, for all peace?"³

Many theologians, Protestant and Catholic, concurred: "Armstrong's boots, grating on the crisp, dry surface of the Moon, have announced a new theological watershed. That earthly sound on an unearthly body will lead to a profound shift in the faith and basic attitudes of Christians and other believers, a fact that gradually will become apparent with coming generations. . . . It will cause an eventual, and inevitable, modification in the way man comprehends the man-God relationship—perhaps the most important keystone in his ego-structure and in his concept of his place in eternity."⁴ The theologians preached that God had put Neil Armstrong on the Moon to show God's greatness in a new light; to reveal God's expansive presence; restore "proper balance" in humankind's outlook on life; and make people believe in God even more deeply than before. "Of course, we knew that the astronauts were religious men," preached one Baptist minister. "They had to be religious. We wouldn't have sent atheists to the Moon or even let them into an astronaut program."⁵

A number of astronauts were, in fact, religious men. Shortly after landing on the Moon, Buzz Aldrin, a Presbyterian, conducted a private communion service inside the lunar module. A few astronauts turned more spiritual as a result of their lunar experience. Apollo 15's James Irwin, who walked on the Moon in August 1971, became an evangelical minister. "I felt the power of God as I'd never felt it before," Irwin declared. Apollo 16's Charlie Duke, one of the CapComs for Apollo 11, became active in missionary work, explaining, "I make speeches about walking on the Moon and walking with the Son."

Not surprising, Neil Armstrong received hundreds and hundreds of letters over the years from people mainly writing to him out of some religious impulse. Many wanted to share their belief in God, or the message of God's love, with him. Others wanted answers to religious and other fundamental questions, thinking someone like Neil Armstrong must have the answers or at least special insights into the nature of man, Christ's suffering, heaven, and the afterlife.

The truth was, Neil didn't. In fact, he was not a religious man in any doctrinal sense at all. It was something that his mother, Viola, a strongly devout evangelical Christian, could never accept about her son. Whenever his mother spoke about religion, Neil would listen politely and in silence, offering some terse comment only if pressed. (Loving his mother and wanting to save her from her son's lack of belief in the Christian faith, young Neil developed a conflict-avoidance strategy, which then became a part of his personality and the way in which he dealt with many other difficult subjects during his adult life.)

That is not to say that Neil did not believe in God. It is clear that by the time he returned from Korea in 1952 he had become a type of deist, a person whose belief in God was founded on reason rather than on revelation, and on an understanding of God's natural laws rather than on the authority of any particular creed or church doctrine.

While working as a test pilot in Southern California in the late 1950s, Armstrong applied at a local Methodist church to lead a Boy Scout troop. Where the form asked for his religious affiliation, Neil wrote "Deist." The confession so perplexed the Methodist minister that he consulted Stanley Butchart, one of Neil's fellow test pilots as well as a member of the congregation. Though uncertain of the principles of deism, Butchart praised Neil as a man of impeccable character whom he would and, during their flying together, did trust with his life. He had never once heard Neil utter a profanity (unlike many Christians he had met), and nor to his knowledge had anyone else. Taking Butchart at his word that Neil would positively influence young Scouts, the minister gave Neil the position.

By Neil's own admission, he did not become aware of deism through any history or philosophy class. By the time he was in high school, his favorite subject was science, under the direction of department head and dean of boys John Grover Crites. Crites came to Blume High School in Wapakoneta in 1944, the same year the Armstrongs moved to town. A man in his early fifties, Crites taught chemistry, physics, and advanced

mathematics; he was the type who, according to one of Neil's classmates, "gave the kids [who shared his interests] all the experience and all the knowledge they could absorb."⁶ Living into the 1970s, Crites was available for interviews on the eve of the Apollo 11 mission. "Science was [young Neil's] field and his love," Crites reported to journalists. Neil not only kept "a goal in mind," but "he was the type of fellow who always tested out a hunch. He was always seeking an answer to some future question," always on course to find the "right answer." This critical spirit made him "a natural for research." Crites continued: "Neil was the type of boy who never let anyone know that he knew anything. You had to ask to get an answer, but he expressed himself well in written form." Fellow engineers, test pilots, astronauts, space program officials, and other colleagues would concur. "I did not see Neil argue," remembers NASA mission flight director Eugene Kranz. "He had the commander mentality and didn't have to get angry." According to Charles Friedlander, who directed the astronaut support office at Kennedy Space Center, "I saw that in the crew quarters. If something difficult came up, he would listen politely. He'd think about it and talk to me about it later if he had something to say."⁷

Like many journalists covering the space program, CBS's Walter Cronkite also experienced Neil's nonconfrontational—some have even said evasive—style. On CBS's *Face the Nation* on Sunday, August 17, 1969, three weeks after the Apollo 11 splashdown, the issue of Madalyn Murray O'Hair publicly declaring Neil an atheist resurfaced. Cronkite asked, "I don't really know what that has to do with your ability as a test pilot and an astronaut, but since the matter is up, would you like to answer that statement?" To which Neil replied, "I don't know where Mrs. O'Hair gets her information, but she certainly didn't bother to inquire from me nor apparently the agency, but I am certainly not an atheist." Cronkite followed up: "Apparently your [NASA astronaut] application just simply says 'no religious preference.'" As always, Neil registered another answer as honest as it was vague and nondescript. "That's agency nomenclature which means that you don't have an acknowledged identification or association with a particular church group at the time. I did not at that time." At which point, Cronkite dismissed the matter. According to Neil's brother, Dean, Cronkite on another occasion asked Neil if he felt closer to God when he stood on the Moon's surface, to which Neil gave a totally ridiculous non sequitur: "You know, Walter, sometimes a man just wants a good cigar."⁸

In this chapter readers will see how letter writers projected various religious beliefs onto Neil, the other astronauts, and space exploration in general, and how Neil responded to such letters—not by arguing with anyone, but by ignoring their questions or sidestepping the issue of religion altogether.

“WE UNDERSTAND THAT YOU ARE A CHRISTIAN”

August 1, 1970

Dear Mr. Armstrong:

Our family is concerned about whether men should be going to the moon and other planets or not.

We understand that you are a Christian, so probably you know what is said in Psalm 115, verse 16 (“the heaven, even the heavens, are the Lord’s; but the earth hath he given to the children of men”).

We would really appreciate your views on this verse and it’s meaning and it’s possible connection with the rightness or wrongness of journeys into space.

Cordially,

Mrs. Stanley L. Moore
Brookfield, Missouri

NOTE: THE ABOVE IS A COPY OF A LETTER WE SENT TO YOUR HOME IN OHIO. WE HAVE RECEIVED NO ANSWER, SO PROBABLY YOU DIDN’T RECEIVE THE LETTER.

“HOPED THAT THE LANDING WOULD
HAVE GREAT SPIRITUAL MEANING”

October 14, 1970

Dear Mr. Armstrong:

On the first anniversary of the moon landing, you, Neal Armstrong, first to step on the moon, said you had hoped that the landing would have

great spiritual meaning to the entire world (or words to that effect). I personally had hoped that the “state of mankind message” in my “God & Country” booklet would have had the meaning to which you had referred. So for you, Neal Armstrong, I have written another.

Neal Armstrong (Man of God)

Wasn't it Neal
Who flew away
To land on the moon
Another day?

Wasn't it Armstrong
Who lead the command
On their way
To a foreign land?

But when they touched
How did we feel?
Didn't some gasp?
Didn't some reel?

If I changed it
And reversed the field
As a farmland in draught
Short on yield

If I turned the name
(Reversed it, say)
Would the meaning
Grow this day?

At “touchdown”
 (“Try this for feel”)
Didn't the strong arm
Make us all Neal?

Sincerely,

John Calvin Warder
Fremont, Iowa

RELIGION AND BELIEF

“HALLELUJAH!”

December 23, 1970

Dear Sir and Brother in Christ,

We here in this Christian orphanage are so longing to get from you the *statement* that the first word you said while stepping on the moon in July 1969 was hallelujah!

It seems there are only few people who understood your short prayer and the word hallelujah. Here in our orphanage it is only one person, elsewhere 2 persons, who heard it and the technician from Radio Djakarta, the R.R.I, who heard it the short prayer, but understood not exactly.

When David Itaar, son of the parents of this orphanage, called Pelangi, what means Rainbow. Heard it he told his parents and us and we were enthusiastic and happy. One of the other two persons who heard the word hallelujah is a young lad from Kupang who came from Djakarta and told it, but I do not know her personally, even not her name. The other lady is from Ambois and works in the American Embassy in Djakarta and told me that she *read it* but could not find the place again. I pray for God's Spirit in you, and that His will be done.

Miss H. Arkema
Panti Asuhan Pelangi
Abepura
Irian Barat (West Irian)
Indonesia

“THE BENEFITS OF TRUE CHRISTIAN LIVING”

August 27, 1971

Dear Mr. Neil Armstrong,

While working with young precious children this summer in a Bible school program I had an opportunity to present to our 14 children an inspiring story of your life as presented in a small booklet by Norman Vincent Peale. It was a fine example for young children and it brought

home so clearly to them the benefits of true Christian living.

Since then my only son Peter has taken ill with leukemia. He has so much promise, spunk and courage. He seems to take everything “thrown at him.” He is unaware of his real illness but knows he is ill. He fights back each time and we sincerely believe he will again make it.

My request is simple: a word of encouragement from a fine American who has placed God and his country as top priority. He is a patient at Children’s Memorial Hospital, West 3, Fullerton Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Sincerely,

Mrs. A. L. Molina
Joliet, Illinois

Neil sent a short encouraging letter to young Peter Molina but his letter expressed no religious views or messages. The booklet by Norman Vincent Peale mentioned by Mrs. Molina may be a reference to the magazine Guideposts, which Peale founded in 1945. In the February 1970 issue of Guideposts there was an article by Neil’s mother, Viola Armstrong, “As told to Lorraine Wetzel,” entitled “Neil Armstrong’s Boyhood Crisis,” in which Viola recounts an incident in which Neil, as a sixteen-year-old, saw one of his fellow students die in a plane crash, causing Neil (allegedly) to question whether he should himself keep flying (he had earned his pilot’s license on his sixteenth birthday). According to the story, Neil spent most the next few days in his room, praying and reading the Bible, before deciding that God wanted him to continue flying. In my interviews with Armstrong for First Man, Neil asserted that this story was false and that it was a projection of his mother, a devoted evangelical Christian, onto him after he experienced the death of the young man (Carl Lange) in a plane crash outside of Wapakoneta, Ohio, on July 26, 1947, shortly before Neil’s seventeenth birthday.

“A FRIEND OF MINE DOESN’T BELIEVE IN GOD”

September 3, 1971

Dear Mr. Armstrong,

I have a problem which I hope you will help me solve. A friend of mine doesn’t believe in God. He thinks science has all the answers.

Because he has a great admiration for you and would respect your opinion, I would appreciate it if you could send him a letter indicating your beliefs and how your knowledge of science has affected them. Thank you for helping me bring the peace of God's love into his life.

Sincerely,

Neil Bunker

University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

Whitewater, Wisconsin

Send the letter to: Cliff Anderson, Jr., Oconto Falls, Wi.

No copy of any letter from Neil to Cliff Anderson exists in Purdue University's Neil A. Armstrong papers collection.

“THE GREATEST GIFT THAT WE COULD THINK OF”

September 28, 1971

Dear Colonel Armstrong,

In July 1969 you and your fellow Astronauts achieved what we human beings had never achieved before you by landing on the moon thereby blazing a terrific trail for mankind. In appreciation of your feat members of my Church wrote you a letter on 25th September, 1969 to felicitate the three of you on your achievement. We were so thrilled by your success that if we had a thousand pounds to spend on a gift it would be inadequate to express our joy and congratulations; so all we could do was send each of you a Bible backed up with our prayers. This, financially speaking, was a very small gift but spiritually speaking and in our manner of thinking it was the greatest gift that we could think of. Since that time my Congregation and I have never slackened in our prayer for you and for other brave men who are following in your footsteps; you have always been in our thoughts.

One outcome of this is that my Congregation and I have decided to honour you further by having the names of the three of you associated with the foundation-laying of one of the Churches which have been building of late and to this end we propose that the foundation stone of our new Church in Lagos which is the capital both of the Federation of

the Lagos State be laid in your name by a person of your choice.

When we have heard from you we shall let you know the date of the foundation laying and other particulars.

Yours sincerely,

Prophet C. O. B. Ijaola
Founder & General Superintendent
Christ The Savior's Church (Aladura)
Lagos, Nigeria

*"I would like to express my appreciation for the
honor you have bestowed upon us"*

December 20, 1971

Mr. C. O. B. Ijaola
Prophet, Christ The Savior's Church (Aladura)
Lagos, Nigeria

Dear Mr. Ijaola:

Thank you for your very kind letter of September 28. I apologize for my delayed response.

On behalf of all who were connected with the success of the Apollo 11 mission, I would like to express my appreciation for the honor you have bestowed upon us. I have been in touch with my colleagues and it is our hope that someone from the American Embassy in Lagos might be able to represent the Apollo 11 crew at the foundation laying ceremony for your new building.

Please extend to the members of your congregation our sincere best wishes on this important and meaningful occasion in the life of your church.

Sincerely,

Neil A. Armstrong

“BOW DOWN TO GOD IN PEACE”

December 4, 1971

Dear Mr. Armstrong,

I sent a copy of this poem to your mother, as this was my tribute, the best way I could express it. I am in my seventies and do not write so good. If you want to keep this, have you a copy printed. Your mother wrote that she would keep her copy.

I saw you on television and decided to send this which I wrote when landed on the moon.

“To Our Astronauts, July 20, 1969”

There is a time and place for everything ‘neath the Sun
Our new discoveries have just begun
To-day on, the moon, a man did land
I saw him scoop a hand of sand.
On the moon, I saw him walk
From a faraway distance I heard him talk.
The mystery of God, o’er and o’er
Man has tried many ways to explore.
On the wings of the Eagle you flew away
Hoping to come back to us some day.
You flew into the mysteries of God
Where, no human foot had ever trod.
You left footprints in the sand
In a faraway country you did stand.
Now, of all these things we can brag
You planted there our American flag.
O’er that land, may she proudly wave
In honor of the names of our brave.
Armstrong, Alden, and Collins you will see
Your names go down in history.
May all the world bow down to God in peace
To live in harmony, ’til time shall cease.

—Edna Sweeney

“Thank you for sharing your poem”

January 3, 1972

Mrs. Edna Sweeney
Dayton, Kentucky

Dear Mrs. Sweeney:

Thank you for sharing your poem honoring Apollo 11 with me. The tributes paid the flight of Apollo 11 have been most gratifying and I appreciate your taking the time to send me your reflections about the first moon landing, in which I had the honor to participate.

Sincerely,

Neil A. Armstrong
Professor of Aerospace Engineering

“WE ARE TRULY BLESSED”

December 17, 1971

Dearest Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong:

Although you do not know me, I, like people all over the world, was only one of the millions of people praying for you on your history-making journey to the Moon—and I feel we are truly blessed in this beautiful country of ours to have men like you, with all the courage and devotion which you have. May you and your family be truly blessed in the next year and all the continuing years to come.

I also wish you well in your next career and feel the young men fortunate to have you as a teacher are ever so lucky.

May God bless you and yours always.

Peace for Mankind.

Mrs. Betsy Best
Long Beach, California

RELIGION AND BELIEF

Mrs. Best had seen a newspaper story relating that Neil had resigned his NASA position and was becoming a professor of aerospace engineering at the University of Cincinnati.

“PRAY ON SPACE TRIPS”

January 5, 1972

Dear Neil Armstrong,

My name is Brian Stuart. I belong to South Jefferson Christian Church. For a merit badge for Bible Scouts I had to write an astronaut and encourage him to pray on space trips. I hope you will.

Your friend,

Brian
Valley Station, Kentucky

“ASKING FOR YOUR HELP”

August 16, 1972

Dear Sir:

The parishioners of St. Paul's Catholic Church of Jacksonville Beach, Florida are preparing to put on their annual fiesta to be held September 30, 1972.

In an effort to make the most successful Spanish fiesta ever, we are asking for your help. In a particular booth, we are going to raffle off items of a personal nature from prominent people, such as yourself, with proceeds going to the church.

The item can be anything of your choice, preferably something you feel would be a keepsake by a delighted owner.

If you are able to assist us, we would be most grateful.

Please send the item to the following address, if possible no later than September 20, 1972. [Address withheld.]

Sincerely yours,

Nancy McMann
Chairman Raffle
St. Paul's Parish
Jacksonville Beach, Florida

Reply from Fern Lee Pickens, Neil's assistant

September 15, 1972

Mrs. Bruce McMann
Daytona Beach, Florida

Dear Mrs. McMann:

Mr. Armstrong has asked me to thank you for your letter offering him the opportunity to participate in your fund-raising project by contributing a personal memento.

We regret we are unable to honor your request. He receives so many similar requests that, in fairness to all concerned, we have found it necessary to decline all of them.

We do appreciate your interest and hope your project will be a success.

Sincerely,

(Mrs.) Fern Lee Pickens
Office of Public Affairs
NASA Headquarters
Washington, D.C.

“DO YOU PRAY?”

September 25, 1972

Dear Mr. Armstrong,

I am a eight grade student at St. Michael's School, Findlay, Ohio. In our religion class we are studying prayer, and is part of a project. I am asking famous people in the world, their ideas about prayer. Do you pray?

RELIGION AND BELIEF

If you do, would you share your thoughts about the value of prayer?
Would you send me a copy of a favorite prayer?

I would like to congratulate you for the lovely moon walk.

Sincerely,

Linda Smoke
St. Michael School
Findlay, Ohio

Reply from Ruta Bankovskis, Neil's secretary

September 26, 1972

Linda Smoke
Saint Michael School
Findlay, Ohio

Dear Linda:

Professor Armstrong has asked me to reply to your letter asking him for his thoughts on the value of prayer. We are unable to honor your request as Professor Armstrong considers this too personal a matter to make public.

He asked me to thank you for your interest.

Sincerely,

Ruta Bankovskis
Secretary to Professor Neil A. Armstrong

“WHAT YOU FELT IN A ‘RELIGIOUS’ VEIN”

October 11, 1972

Dear Sir:

I am presently a Senior of Aerospace Technology at Arizona State University. I am enrolled in a course of Aerospace Systems Design, and we have begun studies on life support systems. I would like to report on Pressurization, and this will be my secondary theme. However, as we

got onto the subject of isolation, we learned; "Nearly every astronaut has returned with a changed psychology, and in general, more religious." This interested me to a great extent and I would enjoy writing a paper on this if I'm allowed to write a non-technical paper. Otherwise I will turn it in as a minor. This brings me to the subject of this letter.

I would deeply appreciate a reply (general or specific, short or long) concerning yourself and what you felt in a "religious" vein (Christianity included) as you viewed earth, space, or at any moment in your flight.

I am enclosing a stamped, self-addressed post card which I would appreciate you dropping in a mailbox if you wish not to reply. This will give me a chance to abort and write on a different subject if necessary. Obviously without "personal opinions" I would be hard-pressed for data.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Bob Diehl
Tempe, Arizona

"I'M A BORN AGAIN CHRISTIAN"

November 30, 1972

Dear Mr. Armstrong,

I am a great fan of yours. My name is Bob Reader. I am 12 years old. I have 5 sisters but no brothers or dad. I'm a junior astronomy here in Grand Rapids. I've a scope of my own.

I heard that there is to be another launch on December 6. I do pray it will be a very good one.

Could you find it in your heart to write me? I'm a born again Christian and thank God for good men like you. I would consider a great honor "please." You're the kind of man I would like to grow up to be.

Thank you very much.

Your true friend.

Bob Reader
Denison, Michigan

RELIGION AND BELIEF

At the bottom of his letter Bob gave Neil his phone number. The launch referred to in the letter was delayed to December 7, 1972. It was the launch of Apollo 17, the last of the Apollo manned lunar landing missions.

Reply from Fern Lee Pickens

February 20, 1973

Master Bob Reader
Denison, Michigan

Dear Bob:

Mr. Armstrong has asked me to thank you for your letter and the fine compliment you pay him by desiring to grow up to be like him. He is always interested in hearing from young people who are interested in the space program and would like to answer personally all the letters he receives. However, this is not possible because of the demands on his time.

We are enclosing an autographed picture of Mr. Armstrong and some information which we hope you will enjoy.

Sincerely,

(Mrs.) Fern Lee Pickens
Office of Public Affairs
NASA Headquarters
Washington, D.C.

“LITTLE PROCESSION TO THE HIGH ALTAR”

June 21, 1974

Dear Mr. Armstrong:

The time is approaching the service that will be held in the Cathedral to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Apollo XI mission. The form of that service, about which I wrote you earlier, is now rapidly taking shape.

The lunar sample that is to be presented to the Cathedral for inclusion within the beautiful new "Space Window" has been prepared at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, delivered to the NASA here and will shortly be brought to the Cathedral for safekeeping until the service on July 21st.

I know when you wrote me last you were not absolutely certain whether you would be able to accept my invitation to attend. I hope that your plans have developed in a way that will permit you to honor us with your presence. In that case may I ask you to be good enough to make a ceremonial presentation of the lunar material to me in the course of the service. I shall invite Mike Collins and Edwin Aldrin to accompany you in the little procession to the high altar where you would offer the rock with a graceful word which we would be glad to prepare for you.

I very much hope that you may be able to be here and to take such a significant part in a ceremony that will, I think, be deeply meaningful to our whole nation.

Faithfully yours,

The Very Reverend Francis B. Sayre, Jr.
Dean
Washington Cathedral
Mount Saint Alban
Washington, D.C.

"I am wary of how it will be reported in the press"

July 15, 1974

The Very Reverend Francis B. Sayre, Jr.
Washington Cathedral
Mount Saint Alban
Washington, D.C.

Dear Dean Sayre:

I was pleased to find your letter awaiting my return to the university after several weeks' absence. I do not teach during the summer months and visit only occasionally.

I'm pleased to hear that all is well with the plans for the ceremony of

21 July. I do plan to attend.

Although I have no reservations about participation in the service in the manner suggested, I am wary of how it will be reported in the press. Most newspapers will say that the Apollo 11 crew gave a lunar rock to the Washington Cathedral.

The readers' impression that the sample was previously in the crew's possession will be misleading. Of course, the crew could represent NASA, but inasmuch as none of us are now affiliated with the agency, the proper impression will be difficult to create.

I personally believe that the most straightforward solution would be to have Dr. [James] Fletcher [the NASA Administrator] make the presentation. I know you will consider these thoughts as you formulate your final program.

Sincerely,

Neil A. Armstrong
Professor of Aerospace Engineering

"Living symbols of the great leap"

July 26, 1974

Dear Mr. Armstrong:

In behalf of Dean Sayre may I tell you what a great honor it was to have you participate in the moon rock service here in the cathedral last Sunday. You and your colleagues certainly are under great burdens as living symbols of the great leap; I suspect there must be times when that burden is light and others when it is annoyingly heavy. I hope that Sunday was one of the former!

Thank you for helping to make that day one of the most historical in the annals of the cathedral.

Faithfully yours,

Jeffrey P. Cave
Canon Precentor
Washington Cathedral
Mount Saint Alban
Washington, D.C.

Neil's Apollo 11 crewmates, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins, also attended the ceremony at the Washington National Cathedral on Sunday, July 21, 1974. Together they presented a fragment of a Moon rock across the cathedral's Jerusalem Altar to Reverend Sayre, who then held the rock aloft before the crucifix. The fragment was 7.18 grams of basalt lunar rock estimated to be some 3.6 billion years old. It was embedded into the Scientists and Technicians Window on the south side of the cathedral, in a nitrogen-filled capsule sitting at the center of a section of red glass representing the planet Mars. The beautiful stained-glass creation, which became familiarly known as the Space Window, was designed by St. Louis artist Rodney Winfield to commemorate America's exploration of space and man's first steps on the moon. Winfield's intention for the window was "to show the minuteness of humanity in God's universe."⁹ Besides the representation of the Red Planet, the artwork also features whirling stars and orbiting planets, featuring colors inspired by NASA photographs taken during the Apollo 11 mission. Divine rays of light radiate from numerous solar spheres, and white dots of stars shine through the dark background. There are also thin silvery trails depicting the path of the Apollo 11 spacecraft. As tourist guidebook *Atlas Obscura* described it, the Space Window is the embodiment of "the intersection of religious thought with the spirit of exploration and the mysteries of the universe"¹⁰—in sum, the glorious meeting of science and religion.

As Neil suspected, stories about the July 21, 1974, service, universally reported that the Moon rock was "a gift from the crew of Apollo 11."

Significantly, the Washington National Cathedral, on September 13, 2012, was the scene of the large public memorial service honoring Neil's life following his death on August 25 from complications following cardiac bypass surgery in a suburban Cincinnati hospital. Before an overflowing crowd, Mike Collins led the mourners in a prayer. Eulogizing Neil was his good friend and Purdue mate Gene Cernan, the Apollo 17 mission commander and last man to walk on the Moon, and Charles Bolden, the NASA administrator. Also speaking at the service were John H. Dalton, former U.S. Secretary of the Navy, and the John W. Snow, a fellow Buckeye and former CEO of CSX Corporation who had served as U.S. Secretary of the Treasury under President George W. Bush. One of Neil's favorite contemporary singers, jazz contralto Diana Krall, sang *Fly Me to the Moon*. Although Neil was a deist and not a doctrinally religious man—a fact not acknowledged during the church service, of course—the Reverend Gina Gilland Campbell read a passage from the Book of Matthew, and the Right Reverend Mariann Edgar Budde delivered a homily.

“THE WORD OF GOD MAKES IT PLAIN”

July 17, 1974

Dear Neil,

As I read the article in the *U.S. News & World Report* of you stating “Where one is going?” my heart was touched that *you do not know*. The word of God makes it plain. Please read the booklet “No Detours to Heaven.” Only two ways where man can go. He makes his choice.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Gladys B. Crocker
Tempe, Arizona

Neil's question cited in the U.S. News and World Report story concerned the direction to be taken by the U.S. space program, not to anything related to humankind's spiritual life.

“YOUR AMERICAN AND CHRISTIAN STAND”

November 20, 1974

Dear Dr. Armstrong:

This is a request for a big favor—for the many teenagers who need to sense anew your American and Christian stand.

Since I can't interview you in person, I've depended on Ohio friends who have talked some with your Mother, and numerous articles I've collected.

I'm a free-lance writer of Christian juveniles. I enclose a copy of a story I'd like to send to a publisher who has already accepted other features.

Will you please correct where necessary, then write a statement for the publisher giving me permission to submit this story?

I will be deeply grateful for this courtesy. I do not want to send it without your knowledge.

In sincere appreciation,

Laura S. Emerson
Assoc. Prof. of Speech Emeritus
Member of National League of American Pen Women
Marion, Indiana

For many years Professor Laura S. Emerson taught speech at Indiana Wesleyan University, a private Christian liberal arts university located in Marion, Indiana, which is an institution of the Wesleyan Church, an evangelical Protestant denomination. In her letter Dr. Emerson was most likely making reference to the story in Guideposts that Neil's mother related about his "boyhood crisis."

"Your sources are inaccurate"

November 22, 1974

Professor Laura S. Emerson
Marion, Indiana

Dear Professor Emerson:

I very much appreciate your courtesy in sending your draft to me for approval.

I must be candid and tell you that I do not wish stories of the type you have prepared to be published. If I did, I would certainly respond more favorably to the many inquiries I receive from editors and publishers; and write them myself.

Your sources are inaccurate. People remember and report what they wish to remember. In my opinion, the anecdotes bear little resemblance to the facts as they occurred.

I very much hope that you will accept my request to refrain from publication.

Sincerely,

Neil A. Armstrong
Professor of Aerospace Engineering

In typical fashion, Neil declined to provide any such statement to the college professor—nor would he ever comment publicly to anyone else on his religious

beliefs. Privately, as stated in an earlier notation in this chapter, Neil was a deist, a person who accepted the rational form of spiritual belief that grew out of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and Age of Reason, which posited God's existence as the "master architect" and cause of all things but which rejected divine revelation and direct intervention of God in the universe by miracles. Of course, Neil shared none of that with Professor Emerson—or anyone else.

"A CLASSMATE OF MINE FROM THE SEMINARY"

July 27, 1975

Dear Mr. Armstrong—

Happy and prayerful greetings to you and your family. I hope you are having a most pleasant summer.

I am really most reluctant to disturb you like this, but on the chance it wouldn't be too much of an inconvenience, may I ask a favor of you. A classmate of mine from the seminary—and a fellow missionary in The Orient (Taiwan & Hong Kong)—will be visiting me in Cincinnati next week (Aug. 4–8). He is a real "space-buff" and was one of the most excited and thrilled of the people on this globe who watched your moon-landing. I know it would be the Thrill of his life for him if we could get a chance to meet you, just to say "hello," for a couple minutes. He's on his way back to Taiwan after a six week home leave, and this would be a great send off for him.

I could arrange to be at any place and at any time if this is convenient for you. If not, I completely understand, and I'm really sorry to have taken up so much of your time already.

Just in case, I'll take this opportunity to say thanks for the Thrill of a lifetime for all of us. After six years, it's still hard to believe it.

Sincerely,

James Huvane
The Maryknoll Fathers
Cincinnati, Ohio

P.S. I'll enclose a self-addressed envelope to facilitate this for you.

Apparently Neil agreed to meet with the two missionaries, as there is a cursive notation in the hand of one of Neil's secretaries at the top of the letter: "Meeting cancelled by Rev. Huvane due to funeral."

"WE ARE ALL ON REMOTE CONTROL FROM GOD"

December 3, 1978

Dear Neil,

Well so far I cannot get anyone to believe me that I met the spirit of Dad on train wheels in my head then three months after you landed on the moon I brought Dads screaming soul out of the cemetery, and put it up into the heavens. I believe my son is God and his sister the Blessed Virgin. I suppose only time will tell then in the year 2,000 when the skys open up than we will all be living back in the mountains. I cannot wait for that day.

Do you remember telling me you were going to be the first man to land on the moon and I said nothing would be worry me because I would be living with God and his mother it seems as though both of our dreams have come true we were only children ourselves when we said that.

After I went home out of hospital after I had my son my head went on to further train wheels and I was completely knocked out to it, it was a pleasure to open my eyes and know that I was alright. I feel as though I have experienced death.

There is nothing you or anyone else can do for me except that I want you to know that I am waiting for you to come and take us all back to the mountains. I hope you and your family are well. I read about you losing your finger I hope you are now alright. God did that to you, seen we are all on remote control from God.

I remain

Mrs. Jeanette Lorraine Dent
Brisbane
Queensland, Australia

“WE WOULD ALL SEEK THE REAL PERFECTION”

August 20, 1979

Dear Mr. Neil Armstrong,

Here are some Christian thoughts that may interest you, I hope.

It would be nice if everybody wouldn't consider everybody else as a sex symbol first, then an ego symbol, because that way birds of a feather fly together. And while I like birds, I think human beings have much more of a task in life than groups flocking and flying together.

If everybody claims to be a human being, Mr. Neil Armstrong, let them prove it to everybody who is not a killer, and to everybody who is not a trouble looking, or trouble seeking, predator, Mr. Neil Armstrong, predator like other birds of a feather like to flock together, no matter what their religion, nationality or race. They range from mental predators, to physical predators to sexual predators, they all have one thing in common, they dislike and some even despise, those persons or people they consider weak. Some of them even despise babies, because babies shouldn't be weak either. These mental, physical, and sexual predators who despise the weak, Mr. Neil Armstrong, what makes them think they are really brave and strong? A couple of good punches would flatten them for life, for they only have the courage to fight those they consider a lot weaker than they are.

Mr. Neil Armstrong, I think God gives to some persons who may be dumb, guilt feelings, so that they will know when they are doing something wrong. I think God gives them also awareness of those dangers, and people dangers around them, for their own satisfaction. Mr. Neil Armstrong, I've often seen babies with nipples in their mouths and I've wondered does a nipple in the mouth of a baby give it mental security. Why would a baby seek mental security in a nipple, when he or she has a mother? It must be really terrifying to some babies, because they have no way of protecting themselves.

[This letter continues for another five pages, with nine more references to “Mr. Neil Armstrong.” The letter then concludes as follows.]

Mr. Neil Armstrong, with God's government of humanity and its truths in our minds daily, and its rights and wrongs in our minds daily, and its justice in our minds daily, who would want to stay here at all?

Mr. Neil Armstrong, with all of our minds that perfect in regard to

everybody else, we would all seek the real perfection: God's mind without our bodies.

Sincerely,

[Name withheld]
Cincinnati, Ohio

Neil instructed his secretary not to respond to this letter.

Over the years, Neil received hundreds of very curious cards and letters, many of them from crackpots whose words make no sense but also from many others, though undoubtedly eccentric and offbeat, who offered (mostly) sensible thoughts. Neil almost never answered any such letters himself; if the letter writer received any reply, it was a form letter written and signed by Neil's secretary. In this case, he instructed his secretary, Vivian White, not to respond to the letter.

“DO YOU BELIEVE IN TRANSMIGRATION
OR REINCARNATION?”

April 4, 1980

Dear Mr. Armstrong,

Your hosting of the PBS-TV series on Charles Darwin leads me to believe you fully accept Darwin's theory of evolution.

Yet his “survival of the fittest” idea seems to be in error, inasmuch as the unfit in Africa, India, & Latin America seem to survive despite inadequate diets.

However, the Bible and other “holy books” appear to be only various theories about man's alleged “soul” and “spiritual nature.” Since they all differ, they can hardly be said to be “divinely inspired” or “revealed” or “dictated by God.” Even if one accepts these as allegories, symbols, parables, etc., much they have to say are folklore (such as Samson killing off thousands of Philistines with the “jawbone of an ass”), or obviously untrue (as Joshua's commanding the Sun to stand still), or inconsistent (as Jesus being taken to the cross at 9:00 A.M. in one gospel and at 12:00 noon in another).

Man appears to be an aggressive animal—as the Europeans and British taking the land from the Indians, or the Jews reclaiming their

“holy land” after being gone 1,000 years and using the Old Testament “prophecy” as an excuse for their aggressive activities.

But the complexity of organisms—the grasshopper, the bird, man’s body and brain—make one wonder how it could have evolved to such near perfection after even thousands or millions of years.

Man does not seem to have free will, as claimed by the Jews, the Catholics, the Methodists, and the Hindus. Even Adam and Eve could not restrain themselves from eating the “forbidden fruit” after being made in “God’s image.”

Aristotle considered the “soul” as simply the life principle and, unlike Paul, gave the carrot, tree, bird, fish, and dog a soul as well as man. Yet Aristotle believed some part of man’s intellect survived death, and seems not to have believed in evolution.

Do you believe in transmigration or reincarnation?

Do you believe in astrology? For example, the solar eclipse of July 20, 1963, fell on the natal Saturn of John F. Kennedy and four months later (the usual time for an eclipse to take effect) he was assassinated. If the eclipse was the “cause” of his death, we could say it was caused either by the eclipse and perhaps due to some misdeed in his previous life; or we could say it was simply a statistical “correlation,” the “cause” being unknown or uncertain (as, a number of children have lumps around their necks below the jaws, and so the doctors say they have mumps).

In the book of Job we have a mystery story without a solution, for if Job being a very good man nevertheless suffered much misfortune, it hardly makes sense, since logically good people go to heaven and enjoy life on earth as well and bad people suffer and go to hell, robbers go to prison and non-robbers go free. For Job to say he accepted his misfortune and the wisdom from an inscrutable God hardly does more than beg the question. The same reasoning applies to the story of Jesus and the blind man.

I would like to ask your opinions and if you have books on the subject to recommend which would shed further light. I would be glad to read them.

Sincerely yours,

Buell D. Huggins
Herrin, Illinois

A RELUCTANT ICON: LETTERS TO NEIL ARMSTRONG

Reply from Vivian White, Neil's assistant

April 21, 1980

Mr. B. D. Huggins
Herrin, Illinois

Dear Mr. Huggins:

Mr. Armstrong acted as the host for the BBC production, "The Voyage of Charles Darwin." He took no position on the controversy or the theological implications. He considers that many others are better qualified.

Thank you for your interest.

Sincerely,

Vivian White
Assistant to Neil A. Armstrong

If Neil had wanted his assistant Vivian White to provide a more direct answer to Mr. Huggins's questions, her reply would have made it clear that Neil was a strong believer in modern science, including the theory of evolution. The letter from Mr. Huggins was one of several letters that Neil received—most of them negative—about Neil hosting the series about Charles Darwin.

"BIBLE PROPHECY WILL BE FULFILLED"

August 5, 1982

Dear Mr. Armstrong:

Here's wishing you a happy and healthy 50th.

The last time I heard from you was 13 years ago (as per enclosed copy of your letter.)

I have read that you will be appearing at the Youth Foundation International Leadership Seminar at the Conrad Hilton Hotel in Chicago and would like to meet with you to discuss very important issues.

Two years ago, I contacted Mrs. Gertrude Smith of your City Manager's office, who in turn got your secretary to call me and who, in turn, refused to permit me to speak to you.

You were destined to be the first man on the moon before you were born and you still have another mission to perform.

Incidentally, at the same time that you were registering at Purdue in July 1953, I was at the Pentagon with Maurice B. Graney, Dean of the College of Engineering at Purdue.

There are numerous other coincidences which will be told and documented at our meeting.

Whether we ever meet or not, Bible prophecy will be fulfilled. I can be reached at the above address or phone.

Yours in Christ,

H. J. Macie
Bulk-Pal
LA GRANGE, ILLINOIS 60525
[Phone number withheld]

On this letter Neil wrote, "No reply." In other words, he did not want his secretary to respond to Mr. Macie with any sort of card or letter.

August 5, 1982, was Neil's fifty-second birthday.

"YOUR CONVERSION TO ISLAM"

September 10, 1982

Dear Mr. Armstrong,

Asalam-alaikum. I wish to congratulate you on the wonderful news of your recent visit to Egypt and your conversion to Islam. The story that is being told in our mosques and in our local newspapers is that after registering in a hotel in the city center of Cairo, you walked with a limp to your room where you rested after your weary journey from the U.S. As you lay in bed, suddenly you heard our call to prayer, *Allah akbar Allah akbar!* Hearing this call, you realized it was not the first time you had heard this cry. You had also heard it while walking on the Moon! But not knowing then what it was, now in Cairo you walked down to the hotel desk and asked about what you were hearing. The hotel clerk told you, "It is our call to prayer, the call to all Muslims to go to the mosque for prayers performed five times a day." I have heard that you

then thought to yourself, “O Allah the Blessed, O God, now I remember that same calling was there for me on the surface of the Moon! I heard it there for the first time in my life, and now here again in Egypt I hear it on the earth.” A few months later, you expressed in an interview that you had converted to Islam. The call from Allah to you was true.

My brother in Islam, please declare your submission to Allah in the strongest terms! You will be welcome at mosques throughout the Islamic world. Do not let the American government stop you from declaring your faith!

La hawla wala quwata illah billah (There is no strength nor power except Allah).

Fi Amanullah (May Allah protect you).

Mualaf Subhanallah

Cairo, Egypt

In the five decades since Apollo 11, stories have circulated all around the Muslim world that Neil Armstrong converted to Islam. Typically the stories begin with the assertion that when Neil was on his Moonwalk, he heard a voice singing in a strange language that he did not understand. Only later, after returning to Earth, did Neil realize that what he heard on the lunar surface was the adhan, the Muslim call to prayer. He then allegedly converted to Islam and moved to Lebanon—the country in the Middle East, not Lebanon, Ohio, where he actually moved. Many of the stories also relate that Neil subsequently visited several Muslim holy places, including the Turkish masjid where Malcolm X once prayed. By the early 1980s, rumors of Neil’s conversion to Islam had grown so far and wide that Neil found it necessary to respond—and to get some help in doing so. In March 1983, the U.S. State Department sent the following message to all embassies and consulates in the Islamic world:

1. Former astronaut Neil Armstrong, now in private life, has been the subject of press reports in Egypt, Malaysia and Indonesia (and perhaps elsewhere) alleging his conversion to Islam during his landing on the Moon in 1969. As a result of such reports, Armstrong has received communications from individuals and religious organizations, and a feeler from at least one government, about his possible participation in Islamic activities.

2. While stressing his strong desire not to offend anyone or show disrespect for any religion, Armstrong has advised department that reports of his conversion to Islam are inaccurate.
3. If post receive queries on this matter, Armstrong requests that they politely but firmly inform querying party that he has not converted to Islam and has no current plans or desire to travel overseas to participate in Islamic religious activities.

The State Department's message seems mostly to have provoked the situation, with many of the Muslim faith suspecting that the U.S. government was forcing Neil to hide the truth, not wanting its great American hero to be known as a Muslim, and thus compelling him to deny publicly his actual religious beliefs, which it was well known Neil would not discuss. Requests for him to visit Muslim countries and attend Islamic events became so frequent by the mid-1980s that Neil set up a telephone press conference to Cairo, Egypt, where a substantial number of journalists from the Middle East were told directly by Neil that there was no truth to the rumor. But his denials did not matter. Once when he was visiting his old fraternity house at Purdue, he was approached by a student of Middle Eastern descent. The young man's father, a Purdue professor, had told him about Neil's conversion to Islam. The student asked Neil whether it was true and Neil explained that it was not. The young man did not believe Neil and told him so. He had been convinced by his father that Neil would lie about it.

“THE 7TH TRUMPET OF REVELATION
SHOULD BE SOUNDED”

June 1, 1983

To Mr. Neil Armstrong:

Dearly Beloved,

Greetings and peace love and all joy!

I must in sincerity believe strongly that the Day of the End is exceedingly near. I would propose to you that the Seventh Trumpet will be sounded on 7/31/83, God willing. I will herewith endeavor to explain my reasoning to you:

1. I sought permission from my natural earthly (*Father*) that I should be revealed before the American Apollo 8 Astronauts when they circled the moon on my birthday 12/24/68. He said yes and I the (*Son*) was revealed in accordance with Biblical Prophecy. At that time my Father decided that the 7th Trumpet of Revelation should be sounded on my sister's birthday (which sister is an emblematic incarnation of the *Holy Spirit*), which birthday is 7/31, exactly 7 months and 7 days after my own birthday. (The purport of this missive is largely to illustrate the cooperative conjunction of numerical meanings themselves with the Word, thus hoping to justify the date I give for the Trumpet, 7/31/83.)

2. The date 7/31/83 is exactly 14 (7 plus 7) years 7 months and 7 days from the Apollo sighting of myself and the Family of God on 12/24/68, and of course July is the 7th month, a fitting time for the 7th Trumpet.

3. Apollo 11 landed on the moon on 7/20/69 and splashed down on 7/24/69. Before Neil Armstrong stepped out of the spacecraft the men of Apollo witnessed the Angelic Space Vehicles (UFO's) that I sent to greet them, (they photographed these). From 7/20/69 to 7/31/83 it is 14 (7 plus 7) years and 11 days—compare (Apollo 11). From 7/24/69 to 7/31/83 it is 14 years and 7 days. From the time Apollo 8 sighted me beyond the moon on 12/24/68, until the time Apollo 11 returned, it was exactly 7 months. Apollo 11 made 31 revolutions around the moon. My sister, Margaret Alyss Thomas Purdy, the incarnation of the Holy Spirit, was born on 7/31/31. Apollo 8 made 10 revolutions around the moon. The date I am seeking for the Seventh Trumpet, in fact, from the original coming of the Holy Spirit to the Church, to the birthdate of the incarnation of the Holy Spirit which, God willing, will be the date of the 7th Trumpet. My sister, and mother (who is the Virgin Mary), and I were all baptized on 7/24/42. (Splashdown for Apollo 11 – same date) I am now 43 years old, I was baptized in the year 42 and it is 41 years and 7 days from Baptism to Trumpet.

4. My birthdate is 12/24/39, my consort's (Elaine's) birthdate is 4/7/43. In 1983 before her birthday I was 43 years old and she was 39 (corresponding reciprocally to the years of our birth). Now (in June 83) she is 40 and I am 43 (40 plus 43 equals 83, corresponding to the year 83.) (Halfway between my birthday and hers is Valentine's Day 2/14. Halfway between her birthday and mine is the Feast of the Assumption 8/15, the principal feast of the Virgin Mary, my mother Millicent Edna

Recker Thomas.) Her (Elaine's) birthday is a central date for the celebration of Easter and my birthday is Christmas. Our first Easter in the White House will be 4/7/85. (My retirement began (as originally calculated) on 7/7/77).

5. From Orthodox Easter 1981 (The first Easter of Reagan's Presidency (who is the Beast of Revelation's 7th Head)) to election day 1984, 11/6, when I will be elected President, is 1,290 days as per Daniel 12:11. (The date of Orthodox Easter in '81 was 4/26.) Add another 45 days (See Daniel 12:12), and you have 12/21, usually the first day of winter, the day when days start getting longer, and only 3 days from my 45th birthday. (Symbolically, the Son (Sun) is buried on the (Solstice) Black Friday and is raised on the Third Day Easter (My Birthday) Christmas.) So if you're willing to wait (as per Daniel) you will be blessed, in the feast of Victory!

6. 1983 is the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther and I was baptized and confirmed a Lutheran as was my sister, and several of the Apostles. And since it is thought to be the 1950th anniversary of the Resurrection, the Pope John Paul II has declared it a Holy Year for the Catholic Faith. (And it is the 100th anniversary of my Alma Mater the University of Northern Iowa—which holds many rich associations for my family and Elaine and I and the Apostles.)

7. Elaine's and my daughter Eda (after my mother's middle name—the Virgin Mary) and Alyssia (after my sister's middle name—the Holy Spirit) was born on 9/8/67, the traditional birth date of the Virgin Mary. My daughter Joanie Sue (by my ex-wife Lydia Banks Thomas Geoffrey), was born on 6/24/68, exactly 6 months from my birthday, on the Feast Day of John the Baptizer. She was confirmed in the Lutheran Church (Family of God) on Pentecost Sunday '83. My son Jan Ellison was born 3/7/72, the Feast Day of St. Thomas Aquinas. He is 11 now and in '83 begins to play in a baseball league at Apollo (11?) Park. (There is considerably more to tell about the symbolism of the Apollo flights, mythologically, etymologically, and so forth, yet this will have to suffice for now.)

Therefore be alerted and aroused to readiness for I must believe the time is at hand, God willing. You will hear much more from me when Elaine (Consort Sophia Sakti Radha—Uma) comes! That will be THE day. Amen and Alleluia!!! May God richly Bless you and yours.

[Name withheld]

P.S. Pardon the sloppy typing—I hate to type. Be see'in ya!

Besides withholding the name of the letter writer, all names in the letter have been fictionalized. This letter illustrates just how kooky some of the correspondence Neil received was. This man wrote Neil several letters, none of which he or his secretary answered.

“THE AURA YOU EXPERIENCED”

January 19, 1999

Dear Neil:

I enclose a letter from a guide who was assigned to me on a trip to Israel a couple of years ago. While on the ruins of the Temple Mount stairway in Jerusalem, Ori reflected on a sentence you uttered analogizing the similarity of the aura you experienced stepping there and stepping from the Eagle onto the moon. Do you recall the event during a trip to the Holy City?

I promised Ori that I would ask you and I will respond accordingly.

Hope to see you at the spring meeting.

Regards,

David C. Hurley
Chief Executive Officer
Flight Services Group, Inc.
Sikorsky Memorial Airport
Stratford, CT 06497

I have looked in vain in Purdue's Neil A. Armstrong papers collection for Armstrong's written reply to Mr. Hurley's inquiry. I became aware of this story upon reading Thomas Friedman's 1990 book, From Beirut to Jerusalem, which relates the account as told to him (as with Mr. Hurley) by his guide at the Temple Mount Stairway. In my interviews with Armstrong for First Man, I asked him about the story, as I was very interested in documenting and explaining clearly and correctly Neil's religious views. He told me that the story was untrue—a

RELIGION AND BELIEF

fabrication like so many other stories that had been fabricated about him over the years. Nonetheless, the story about what he allegedly said at the Temple Mount Stairway continues to spread. Currently, a Google search of “Neil Armstrong” and “Temple Mount Stairway” results in 1,140,000 hits.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

James R. Hansen is professor emeritus of history at Auburn University in Alabama. An expert in aerospace history and the history of science and technology, Hansen has published a dozen books and numerous articles covering a wide variety of topics, including the early days of aviation, the history of aerospace engineering, NASA, the Moon landings, the Space Shuttle program, and China's role in space. In 1995 NASA nominated his book *Spaceflight Revolution* for a Pulitzer Prize, the only time NASA has ever made such a nomination. His book *First Man*, which is the only authorized biography of Neil Armstrong, twice spent three weeks as a *New York Times* Best Seller—in 2005 and again in 2018—and garnered a number of major book awards. Translations of *First Man* have been published in more than twenty languages. A Universal Studios film adaptation of the book hit the silver screen in October 2018, with Academy Award winner (*La La Land*) Damien Chazelle directing the film and actor Ryan Gosling starring as Armstrong. Hansen served as coproducer for the film, which won 28 major awards, including an Oscar and a Golden Globe, and received 190 other major nominations.

Hansen began his career in aerospace history while serving in the early 1980s as historian-in-residence at NASA Langley Research Center in Hampton, Virginia. In his first book while working at Langley, *Engineer in Charge* (1985), he uncovered the story of the segregated group of African American women—including the late Katherine Johnson (1918–2020), a Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient in 2015—who worked as

mathematicians and data processors for the government laboratory, later made famous in the celebrated 2016 film *Hidden Figures*.

Over the years Hansen has served on a number of important advisory boards and panels, including the Research Advisory Board for the National Air and Space Museum, Editorial Advisory Board for the Smithsonian Institution Press, and Advisory Board for the Archives of Aerospace Exploration at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. He also is a past vice president of the Virginia Air and Space Museum in Hampton, Virginia. For the past ten years he has served on the National Air and Space Museum Trophy Selection Board. His experience as an academic and public speaker has been wide-ranging both topically and geographically; he frequently serves as keynote speaker, panelist, and lecturer on a wide variety of topics in the history of science and technology.

Hansen has received a number of prestigious awards for his scholarly contributions to the history of flight, notably the Eugene M. Emme Astronautical Literature Award of the American Astronautical Society, Gardner-Lasser Aerospace History Award of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, and Robert H. Goddard Prize of the National Space Club.

A native of Fort Wayne, Indiana, Hansen graduated summa cum laude and with high honors from Indiana University. He earned his master's and PhD at The Ohio State University in 1976 and 1981, respectively. Hansen taught history at Auburn University from 1986 until his retirement in May 2017. He was chair of the Auburn history department for four years and director of the Honors College for six years. Both his teaching and his scholarship received numerous awards from Auburn, including induction into the College of Liberal Arts Teaching Hall of Fame. Students who earned graduate degrees under Hansen's direction have held positions at the University of Central Florida, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, National Air and Space Museum, U.S. Air Force Academy, U.S. Air Force Air War College, National War College, Pentagon, and American Society of Mechanical Engineers.

Hansen has been married to Margaret Miller Hansen, also a Fort Wayne native, since 1976. They reside in Auburn, Alabama, and have two children and four grandchildren.