



In Memoriam: Edgar Mitchell, ScD, PhD

Cassandra Vieten

I was sad to read about the passing of Edgar Mitchell, whose obituary appears below. I had the privilege of sharing a platform with him a few years ago at a meeting in Bruges where he was speaking about his vision for a science of consciousness. Most of the official obituaries mention his founding of the Institute of Noetic Sciences in the same year as the Network. However, they do not convey the breadth and depth of his interest in the way that Cassandra Vieten does below. While at the conference, he related some extraordinary stories about psychic experiences connected with his mother – he combined analytical rigour with intuitive insight in an exemplary way, very much in tune with the ethos of the Network, of which he was an honorary member. When we inaugurated the Beyond the Brain conferences in 1995, Ed was among the speakers, along with Willis Harman, Stan Grof and Charley Tart. You can access these talks on the member side of the website.

When he returned from space forty-five years ago, Apollo 14 Astronaut Dr. Edgar Mitchell committed his life to supporting a sustainable future. He worked tirelessly to understand and promote what he viewed as an absolutely necessary collective shift in consciousness. To those of us who knew him well, Edgar was an enthusiastic, loving, dedicated, courageous, generous, and brilliant man who inspired us to be bold in our exploration of the further reaches of human potential, to fearlessly challenge inadequate paradigms, and to carry his spirit of adventure into investigating our inner lives.

Most people know Edgar Mitchell best as an Apollo 14 astronaut and sixth person to walk on the moon. A US Navy Captain, MIT-trained aeronautics engineer, recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the NASA distinguished service award, and 2005 nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize among many other honors, Edgar Mitchell was a hero in the truest sense of the word.

What fewer people know is that Edgar's spirit of exploration extended well beyond space travel to his lifelong dedication to increasing our scientific understanding of the nature of consciousness.

Space exploration symbolized for Mitchell what it did for his nation—a technological triumph of historic proportions, an unprecedented demonstration of scientific achievement, and extraordinary potential for new discoveries. What Mitchell did not anticipate was a return trip that triggered something even more powerful. As he gazed at Earth floating in the vastness of space and contemplated the history and hopes of humankind on that lonely blue sphere, he was engulfed by a profound sense of universal connectedness.

“I realised that the story of ourselves as told by science — our cosmology, our religion — was incomplete and likely flawed. I recognised that the Newtonian idea of separate, independent, discreet things in the universe wasn't a fully accurate description. What was needed was a new story of who we are and what we are capable of becoming.”

That moment was an epiphany for Mitchell. As an accomplished scientist and engineer, he had grown accustomed to directing his attention to the objective world “out there.” But the experience that came to him while hurtling through space was profound.

“My understanding of the distinct separateness and relative independence of movement of those cosmic bodies was shattered. I was overwhelmed with the sensation of physically and mentally extending out into the cosmos. The restraints and boundaries of flesh and bone fell away. I wondered if Stu and Alan [companion astronauts] were experiencing it as well ... Somehow I never felt the urge to ask.”

The experience led him to a startling hypothesis: Perhaps reality is more complex, subtle, and inexorably mysterious than conventional science had led him to believe. Perhaps a deeper understanding of consciousness could lead to a new and expanded view of reality in which objective and subjective, outer and inner, are understood as complementary aspects of the miracle and mystery of being.

That realisation sowed the seeds of Mitchell's next mission. A few years later, in 1973, he founded the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS). Edgar was troubled by the prevalence of a dualistic worldview in Western thought and science that separates mind and matter and that typically posits matter as the fundamental basis of reality. Fortunately, the advent of quantum physics provided scientific evidence that challenged this dualistic worldview. Experiments at the subatomic level revealed that (under certain conditions) one particle of matter will instantly “respond” when something happens to another particle, even though the two are separated from each other in space. Edgar interpreted that phenomenon as meaning that “awareness” might be present at an elemental subatomic level.

Building on this notion and affirming a learning, self organising principle in the universe, he proposed that awareness can evolve through many levels of complexity and that at an

advanced stage of complexity, say, at the human level, an aptitude for self-reflective awareness begins to emerge. This includes the capacity to make conscious choices and to be held accountable for how actions affect others and their physical environment. Given the deepening problems of today's post-industrial society, in which most threats to our society and planet are rooted in how we view the world and the actions we take as a result, learning how to increase people's consciousness becomes crucial. Edgar, along with many others, maintained that human activity is on an exponential growth curve that cannot be sustained globally under current conditions. He believed that a paradigm shift is underway, but cautioned that the outcome is as yet unpredictable, and survival of humanity on our planet is in question. He believed that the same amount of effort and ingenuity that has been dedicated to the exploration of outer space should be directed toward the investigation of the inner world – our consciousness.

Inspired by Edgar's vision, over the past four decades, the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS) has had a catalytic influence on the frontiers of scientific inquiry. Our investigation into the role of consciousness in healing has significantly contributed to the scientific understanding of how the mind influences health. Our work helped to transform mind-body medicine from a fringe idea into a vital component of

virtually all major medical centers in the United States and, increasingly, worldwide. Our original research on the benefits of meditation and compassion sparked the development of new scientific methods and insights into how we can cultivate our highest potentials. Our pioneering scientific work on interconnectedness through time and space has challenged traditional notions of the nature of reality and is now making its way into mainstream physics. Our frontier research into perennial mysteries, including precognition, life after death, the role of intention in healing, and transformative experiences, continues to broaden the range of acceptable topics for scientific inquiry. IONS continues to expand the boundaries of our understanding of ourselves and of reality.

Today, IONS maintains a team of seven scientists dedicated to the study of frontier topics in consciousness, an education team and innovation lab that translates our findings into real-world applications, a global community of 80,000 with nearly 200 regional community groups who meet regularly worldwide, and a transformative learning and retreat centre an hour north of San Francisco at which 5,000 people per year engage in transformative workshops and trainings.

We honour the life and work of Edgar Mitchell, astronaut, scientist, scholar, and visionary leader, and are proud to carry on his legacy.



Cassandra Vieten, PhD, is President and CEO of the Institute of Noetic Sciences and a scientist at the Mind-Body Medicine Research Group at California Pacific Medical Center Research Institute. Dr. Vieten, a licensed clinical psychologist, has been with IONS since 2001, previously serving as its Executive Director of Research. Portions of this post first appeared in the article "Edgar Mitchell: Cosmic Activist" by Barbara McNeill in the Institute of Noetic Sciences Shift Magazine, Volume 12, 2006.