

Jabba the Nut

It's a nightmare scenario: you're thousands of miles above Earth's surface confined in a high-tech closet with a copilot who suddenly needs a rubber command module and a space suit whose sleeves join at the wrists. It seems the Lisa Nowak incident has convinced NASA that if their astronauts aren't all that well-grounded even on the ground, one of them could easily go astro-nuts in the stratosphere and transform into a space-cadet in both the literal and colloquial senses of the term.

Accordingly, the high command has issued a set of protocols in the event that "Houston, we have a problem" becomes a psychological, rather than a technological assertion. First up in the toolkit for high-flying therapy is, of course, duct tape. No kidding: the manual instructs the saner crew members to bind their addled colleague at the wrists and ankles, all the while explaining that it is all for his own good. The space station and the shuttles come equipped with a pharmacopeia of happy pills so presumably the subject, once subdued, can be tranquilized into submission.

This whole scenario reminds us that human frailty knows no limits, that wherever we go, we take our weaknesses with us. The modern marvel of a lunar landing only opens the opportunity for us to become lunar-tics, and while we can soar into the heavens, we cannot fly far or fast enough to find the Kingdom of Heaven.

Salvation, we learn all over again, does not come from the ground up. Redemption and transformation work the other way around. "He came down from heaven," runs the terse confession of the Nicene Creed, a single-sentence caveat to humble the human spirit with the reminder that all our ingenuity cannot save us from ourselves. The mission that really matters is the one that worked in reverse, sending the Son from the angel-upholstered throne of glory to the gravity-bound smallness of a spiritually crazy people. He made a pinpoint landing in a Bethlehem feedbox, hitting a target as tiny as a single fertilized cell. Since moral insanity proved capable of space travel, holiness had to take the long step down.

Duct tape can detain a deranged body, just as moral legislation can curb unhelpful behavior. Only a new nature, however, can build true holiness from the inside out. If humankind ever reaches the deepest ocean of the farthest planet circling the outer rim of the universe, we will find carved in its darkest cavern the message, "You must be born again."

Mission Out-of-Control,
Doug