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BOWELS AND BRAINS

I was naked, lying on my side on a table in the NASA Flight Medicine Clinic bathroom, probing at my rear end with the nozzle of an enema.Welcome to the astronaut selection process, I thought. It was October 25, 1977. I was one of about twenty men and women undergoing the three-day physical examination and personal interview process that were part of astronaut candidate screening. Almost a year earlier NASA had announced they would begin accepting applications for the first group of space shuttle astronauts. Eight thousand had been submitted. NASA had whittled that pile to about two hundred, a cut I had miraculously made. Over successive weeks all two hundred of us would eventually find ourselves on this same gurney probing at our nether regions as we prepared for our bowel exam.

It was rumored NASA would select about thirty from this group to fly the shuttle. The odds were long that I would be among that blessed few. Not that I wasn't qualified. I had all the squares checked. I was a West Pointer who had taken a commission in the air force. I wasn't a pilot. My eyesight had been too bad for that job. But I had nearly 1,500 flying hours in the backseat of RF-4C aircraft, the reconnaissance version of the F-4 Phantom. Like Goose fromTop Gun, I was the guy in back. In my ten-year career I was a veteran of 134 combat missions in Vietnam, had completed a master's degree in aeronautical engineering, and was a graduate of the Flight Test Engineer course taught by the USAF Test Pilot School. I was most certainly qualified, but so were a few hundred other applicants. I had been around too many super-achieving military aviators to fool myself. While I might have had a little of the Right Stuff, there were legions of others who had it in abundance, pilots who would make the likes of Alan Shepard and John Glenn look like candy-asses.

Yes, the odds were long, but I was going to give it my best shot. At the moment that best shot was aimed squarely at where the sun didn't shine. I was in the process of preparing for my first proctosigmoidoscopy.

Just before I entered the bathroom I overheard one of the civilian candidates lamenting that he had failed his procto-prep. At the wordfailed my ears perked up. He had skimped in his bowel-cleansing efforts and would have to repeat his test tomorrow.

FAILED PROCTO-PREP. I could imagine those words in big red letters on the man's physical report. Who would see them? Would they count in the selection process? When a selection committee was picking one person in seven and each was a superman or a wonder woman, you didn't want to have the wordfailed anywhere, even

in reference to something as innocuous as a procto-prep. My paranoia in this regard was fueled by a military aviator's deathly fear of the flight surgeon. When his stethoscope came to your chest or that blood pressure needle was bouncing, it was your career on the line. A little blip and you could leave your wings on the table. Military aviators looked forward to a physical exam about as much as they looked forward to an in-flight engine fire. We didn't wantfailed on any document concerning anything that came out of a flight surgeon's office. I had known pilots who would secretly visit a civilian off-base doctor for some malady rather than bring it to the attention of a flight surgeon. This had been strictly forbidden, but the only crime was to get caught. I employed the same logic on the flight to Houston for this medical test. In an act of incredible naïveté, the docs at NASA had asked us to hand-carry our medical records from our home bases. This was akin to trusting a politician with a ballot box. As the miles passed, I pulled out pages I felt could generate questions I didn't want to answer. In particular I pulled out references to the severe whiplash I had suffered during an ejection from an F-111 fighter-bomber a year earlier. During that incident my helmet-weighted head had snapped around as if it had been on the tip of a cracking bullwhip. My neck had been badly hyperextended. After a week of wearing a neck brace, the Eglin Air Force Base (AFB) doctors returned me to flight, but I wondered how the neck injury would be viewed by NASA's docs. Certainly it couldn't help me. It was the type of questionable injury that could draw adisqualified stamp on my application. In all likelihood there would be 199 other applicants without a history of neck injuries. I wasn't going to take a chance. I liberated the offending pages from my files, planning to reinsert them on the return flight. I had one very slim chance of getting selected as an astronaut. I wasn't going to let a little thing like a felony get in the way. I would alter official government records and, like countless other aviators before, hope I didn't get caught.

Yes, I was going to give this astronaut selection my best shot. I inserted the enema and squeezed the bulb. I was determined when the NASA proctologist looked up my ass, he would see pipes so dazzling he would ask the nurse to get his sunglasses.

Hold for Five Minutes,read the instruction on the dispenser.Screw that, was my thought. That milquetoast civilian who had failed his clean out had probably blown his load at the first contraction. I would hold my enema for fifteen minutes. I would hold it until it migrated into my esophagus. I clamped my sphincter closed, gritted my teeth, and endured bowel contraction after bowel contraction until I thought I would black out. Finally, I blasted the colonic into the toilet. I repeated the process a second time.

Do not repeat more than twice,the label warned. Yeah, right. With the title of astronaut on the line, the warning could have read,Do not repeat more than twice, death may result, and I would still have ignored it. I grabbed a third enema and then a fourth. The waste of my last purge was as clear as gin.

I walked from the proctologist like a first grader carrying a gold star on a homework

assignment. He had commented several times he had never seen a colon so well prepared. That I didn't shit for the next two weeks was a price I was willing to pay. (And, no, the civilian who had failed his prep wasn't selected.)

Next up was the interview by a NASA psychiatrist. I wondered about this. I had never spoken to a psych in my life. Was there a pass-fail criterion? I considered myself mentally well balanced. (A strange self-assessment given I had just set a world record for holding an enema in a paranoid quest to secure a job.) But how did a psych measure mental stability? Would he be watching my body language? Would a twitch of my eye, a pulsating neck vein, or a bead of sweat mean something? Something bad? In desperation I searched my memory for whatThe Right Stuff had revealed about theMercury 7 astronaut psych evaluations. All I could recall was that they had been given a completely blank piece of paper to "interpret" and that one astronaut had answered, "It's upside down." Was such humor good? I didn't have a clue. I was flying blind.

My first surprise, which added to my fear, was to find out there were to be two psych evaluations by different doctors, each about an hour long. I walked into my first meeting. The doctor rose from behind a desk and introduced himself, shaking hands with a very weak, moist grip. I hadn't been in the room for fifteen seconds and already I was in a panic. Was the grip some type of test? If I echoed it in its limpness, was I indicating I had some latent sexual identity problems? I decided to be firm…not crushing, but firm. I watched his face but it was an enigma. I couldn't read anything. I could have been shaking hands with Yoda. His voice was low; low enough I wondered if this was some sneaky hearing test. He motioned me to a chair. Thank God there was no couch. That novelty would have further rattled me.

He held a clipboard and pencil at the ready. I swallowed hard and waited for what I was certain would be a question like, "How many times a week do you masturbate?" But instead he ordered, "Please count backward from 100 by 7s as fast as you can." I heard the click of a stopwatch and the gathering seconds…tick…tick…tick. My chances of becoming an astronaut were racing away with those seconds!

Only because of my plebe training at West Point, where I had learned to instantly obey any order, was I able to respond with lightning reflexes. If he wanted me to count backward by 7s from 100, then I'd do it. At least I didn't have to answer the masturbation question. I began the litany, 100, 93, 86, 79, 72…, then I got off by a digit or two, tried to restart at my last known correct number, stumbled again, and ended in the 60s in a blurring babble of digits. I finally stopped and said, "I think I'm off track." My comment was answered with theclick of the stopwatch. In the silence it sounded like a gunshot. It might as well have been, I thought. I was dead. At least my astronaut chances had been shot dead. I had failed what was obviously a mental agility test.

The psych said nothing. There was only a prolonged quiet in which all I heard was the scratching of pencil on paper. I had the cleanest colon in the world but my brain was constipated. It had FAILED me. I was certain that was the word being written by the psych. FAILED. Surely the other 199 candidates would breeze through this test. They would probably get to those final numbers…23…16…9…2…in a few blinks of the eye and then ask the psych if he wanted them to repeat the test doing square roots of the numbers. I was certain the man was thinking,Who let this guy in the door?

With nothing to lose, and in a desperate attempt to end the maddening silence, I quipped, “I’m pretty good at counting backward by ones.”

He didn’t laugh. “That won’t be necessary.” His icy tone confirmed it. I had failed.

After the 7s test, the doc once again positioned his pencil and asked, “If you died and could come back as anything, what would that be?”

More panic seized me. Where was this question leading? Into what minefield of the psyche would I now stumble? I was beginning to wish for the masturbation question.

There was no clock running this time, so I gave the question a little thought. Anything? Should I come back as a person? Alan Shepard? That sounded like a safe answer. But then it dawned on me, Shepard, like all test pilots, hated shrinks. Was it Shepard who had dismissively suggested the blank page “was upside down”? I couldn’t recall, but I didn’t want to take a chance. I’d better stay away from a wish for reincarnation as an astronaut icon who might be infamous among psychs for trivializing their profession.

I asked for clarification. “When you say anything? Do you mean as another person or object or animal?”

He merely shrugged with body language that said, “I’m not giving you any leads.” Clearly he wanted me to step on one of those psyche mines by myself.

I toyed with the idea of saying I would like to come back as Wilbur Wright or Robert Goddard or Chuck Yeager or some other aviation/rocketry pioneer. Perhaps this would send a signal that being an astronaut was my destiny. But again, my mind’s voice whispered caution. Maybe such a reincarnation wish would identify me as a megalomaniac in search of glory.

Then, in a burst of inspiration I had it. “I would like to come back as…an eagle.” It was a brilliant answer. Clearly it conveyed my desire to fly yet didn’t give the doctor a door to crawl farther into my synapses. (I later heard one interviewee say he was tempted to answer the question with “I’d like to come back as Cheryl Tiegs’s bicycle seat.” It would have been interesting to see how the psych would have responded to that.)

My eagle answer was acknowledged by more pencil scratching.

His next question was an obvious attempt to have me judge myself. “Tell me, Mike, if you died right now, what epitaph would your family put on your headstone?”

Boy, was this going to be easy,I thought. After faking some serious deliberation I replied, “I think it would read, ‘A loving husband and devoted father.’” I was sure I had scored some points. Could there have been a better answer to convey the message that my family came first, that I had my priorities right? In reality I would have sold my wife and children into slavery for a ride into space. I thought it best not to mention that fact.

“What is it that you feel is your unique strength?”

I wanted to reply, “I can hold an enema for fifteen minutes,” but instead said, “I always do my best at whatever I do.” For once, I told the truth.

Psych One’s interview continued. I was asked whether I was right-or-left-handed (right) and what religion I professed (Catholic). He also inquired about my birth order (number two of six). He seemed to write a long time after hearing these answers. I would later learn a disproportionate number of astronauts (and other super-achieving people) are firstborn, left-handed Protestants. Maybe my exclusion from all of those groups was the reason I couldn’t count backward by 7s.

Finally, I was excused to Psych Two. I walked slump-shouldered to another door, certain my astronaut dream was stillborn on the report that Yoda was finishing…Candidate Mullane unable to count backward by 7s.

Psych Two was the good cop in the good-cop/bad-cop routine. Dr. Terry McGuire welcomed me with a robust handshake and an expansive smile. I’ve seen that same smile on the faces of used car dealers. I looked for the diamond ring on McGuire’s pinky but it was absent.

Dr. McGuire was outgoing and talkative. He didn’t have a pencil and pad in hand. “Come in. Take a load off. Have a seat.” Another chair, thank God. Everything about his voice and mannerisms said, “I apologize for that other bozo you had to contend with. He’s got the skills of a chiropractor. I’m different. I’m here to help you.” Just as it is on the car dealer’s lot, I was certain it was all an act. He wasn’t after my wallet. He sought my essence. He wanted to know what made me tick, and, like Captain Kirk facing a Klingon battle cruiser, I was ordering, “Shields up!” My astronaut chances might already be headed down in flames but I was going to continue to give it my best shot until the rejection letter arrived.

After some small talk about the weather and how my visit was going (fine, I lied), the

good doctor finally began his assault on those shields. He asked just one question. “Mike, why do you want to be an astronaut?”

I had always assumed I would be asked this question somewhere in the selection process, so I was prepared. “I love flying. Flying in space would be the ultimate flight experience.” Then, I added some bullshit to make it sound like love of country was a motivator. “I also think I could best serve the United States Air Force and the United States of America as an astronaut.”

Boy, did I slam-dunk that question,was my thought. The only way I could have done better was if I’d brought in Dionne Warwick to sing the national anthem in the background.

But I was wrong. My slam dunk was rejected. I couldn’t blow off Dr. McGuire with that rehearsed dribble. He looked at me with an all-knowing smirk and replied, “Mike, at the most fundamental level, we’re all motivated by things that occurred in our youth. Tell me about your childhood, your family.”

God, how I hated essay questions.