

# Egos in Space

## By Joseph A. Mootz

Joseph Dvorak sat on his tattered beige-colored couch in his dank one room second story apartment. He stared at the 13 inch two-way color television on the stand across the room from him. His attire included a sleeveless stained white undershirt stretched tight against his rotund middle section, pink and white striped boxer shorts, and faded gray athletic socks which had fallen down around his ankles. He slurped down the last remnants of his third beer as a sharply dressed man appeared on the television screen.

"Good evening," the man in the tailored suit said as he stepped behind a wooden podium covered with microphones. The man had the classic facial features of a Greek statue. His blond hair was trimmed neatly above his ears. The blue silk backdrop behind him was checker-boarded with insignias of the National Aeronautics and Space Association.

"Tonight, I am proud to announce that after a 10 year hiatus, the Space Shuttle will resume flights into outer space," the man said. "As you know all Space Shuttles were grounded after the tragic Columbia accident until funding could be obtained to ensure the proper safety of the astronauts during space flights.

"I am proud that I and my colleagues in the senate were able to pass the bill which created the National Space Shuttle Lottery which allowed us to raise enough money to make the necessary changes to restart the Space Shuttle program.

"Without further introduction, let me start the random number generator which will pick the lucky winner of a trip into space on the newly designed Space Shuttle."

The man pushed the large red button affixed to the podium and 10 white squares appeared at the top of Joseph's television screen. The numbers flashed by on the screen as if they were spinning on the wheels of a slot machine.

"What a crock," Joseph mumbled under his breath.

Joseph recognized the man as Senator John Spearfish, the former boy-band wimp that tried to buy his way onto a Russian space launch. He is finally going to get a ride in space, Joseph thought. All he had to do was get a bunch of his brain-dead female fans to elect him to the Senate and then come up with another government sponsored gambling activity to get back some of the government money doled out to the poor so he could spend it on himself.

Joseph laughed at the arrogance of the man on the screen. With his elbow, he knocked the empty beer can off of the arm of his couch as he moved his hand to his face and rubbed the stubble on his chin. He reached over to the end table next to the couch and picked up the pink slip of paper he had purchased a few hours earlier at the convenience store on his way home from work.

He knew that his chances of winning the lottery were appropriately astronomical. He also knew the exact reason why he wanted to win and that he had to keep that reason a secret. If he did win, he would have to use all his mental energy to convince himself that he wanted to win for a very marketable reason that NASA could use for promoting future lotteries.

If anyone figured out the real reason he wanted to go into space, they would not let him within 100 miles of the Space Shuttle. Already he was trying to think of how he could get past NASA's psychological tests. He laughed at the thought of planning so far ahead for something so unlikely to happen.

The first three numbers flashed on the television screen. Joseph casually checked his ticket and felt his heart race as he recognized the match. He hated the sensation the realization brought to his mind. It reminded him of the feeling he used to get when visited Reno to play the slot machines and would watch two sevens come up on the first two wheels only to watch a lemon come up on the third.

The next three numbers settled into place and Joseph felt himself getting depressed in anticipation of a big disappointment as he realized the numbers matched his ticket. He tried to think of the reason he would give for entering the lottery and tried to make himself believe it.

He wanted to do it for his mother who had passed away two years earlier. If the mission would allow it, he wanted to take his mother's ashes with him and release them through the payload bay of the shuttle and out into the vacuum of space. If he could get the story out and make himself and the world believe it, NASA would not be able to refuse his mission.

The next three numbers came up on the screen. Joseph was not surprised to see that the numbers matched his ticket. He expelled a loud grunt out of his throat as he got off the couch and staggered over to the refrigerator to get another beer in preparation for the arrival of the last number. He popped the top off of the aluminum can and fell back on the stained couch just as the last number fell into place on the screen. He checked the number on his ticket, verified it matched the one on the screen and felt the aluminum can slip from his hand into his lap.

As he jumped off the couch and brushed the cold liquid from his underwear, the red light on his two-way television started blinking. He had just enough time to grab a throw pillow off of the couch and move it in front of his wet crotch before his image appeared simultaneously on his television screen and on hundreds of millions of television screens around the world.

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"Congratulations on winning a trip into outer space," Senator John Spearfish said into the microphones as the image of Joseph Dvorak came into view on the giant television screen at the rear of the conference room. Another giant television screen above the senator's head displayed the same image for the reporters facing him from the floor below the podium.

The senator wiped his brow and wondered what he had gotten himself into. Everyone told him to have the lottery rigged to ensure that an appropriate citizen would accompany him on the shuttle flight, but in his naiveté he did not listen.

"Looks like we caught you with your pants down," the senator said and smiled broadly. The conference room erupted in laughter.

"Why don't you sit back down and I'll have the camera zoom in on your face," the senator said to Joseph. Then to no one in particular he said, "Can we zoom in on Mr., uh, Dvorak's face."

As the camera zoomed in on the face of the tired looking 50 year old man with a two-day growth of stubble on his chin, a purplish-colored nose, and a pimple on his forehead, the senator wondered again if he had made the right decision.

"Mr. Dvorak, as you by now understand, you have just won a trip on the space shuttle," the senator said. "Can you tell us how you feel?"

The conference room fell silent in anticipation of Mr. Dvorak's answer.

Joseph Dvorak's vacant eyes sprung to life and a broad smile came across his face as he spoke. "I feel great," he said. "I can't believe I won. I am just so excited I don't know what to say."

Senator Spearfish smiled and felt his shoulder muscles loosen. He knew he had a winner.

"Can you tell us why you entered the lottery and why you want to take a trip on the Space Shuttle?" he asked.

Joseph paused and looked straight into the camera with swollen eyes. He picked up a shiny gold egg-shaped urn off of the coffee table in front of him and held the urn up in front of his face.

"It was my mothers dying wish that her ashes be spread into outer space," he said.

"Since she died three years ago, I have thought of nothing else.

"When I heard about your work to hold a lottery that would allow common citizens to ride the shuttle, I saw a glimmer of hope that I could fulfill that wish."

"This is all I have left of my mother," he said. "I won't rest until the day I can empty this urn into the heavens above."

A gasp escaped from the corps of reporters in the conference room as they made notes in their electronic personal data assistants.

"Very well son," the senator said. "At this time and pending approval by NASA, I am sure we can accommodate your mother's wish."

That was ambivalent enough to cover himself, the senator thought. He would look like the good guy by encouraging him for now and if he later decided that this guy was too much of a nut to be trusted on the trip he would make NASA play the heavy and tell him he could not go.

"As you all know, at the suggestion of my colleagues in the Senate I put a clause in to the Space Shuttle bill that provided for one civilian citizen, selected by the lottery, and one dignitary, selected by the Senate, to ride on every shuttle flight," the senator said. "As you also know, the Senate selected me as the dignitary for the first flight.

"Let me say that I am honored to have been chosen by my colleagues and I look forward to the rigorous training and evaluation program both Mr. Dvorak and I must pass before we are allowed on the shuttle.

"Now I will open the floor to questions for either Mr. Dvorak or myself."

A cacophony of voices arose from the room below the podium. Reporters stood up and waved their hands in the air to get the senator's attention. The senator pointed to an attractive female reporter near the front of the room.

"Mr. Dvorak," the reporter addressed the giant head on the screen above the senator. "Can you tell us how your mother died and why she wanted her ashes released in space?"

"My mother died of breast cancer at the age of 67," Joseph said. He moved the urn towards the camera as he spoke so that the goblet filled the screen. "She was a very spiritual person and believed there was more to outer space than we will ever understand."

"How do you mean she was spiritual," the reporter interjected her follow up question.

"Now maybe this is getting a little too personal," the senator interrupted. "I am sure once we have had a chance to talk to Mr. Dvorak in detail we will release to the press all pertinent information about him.

"Are there any questions about my role on the mission?"

The reporters stared at the giant screen over the senator's head waiting for Joseph's response.

"She believed in the oneness of the universe," Joseph said. "She believed we all have a little piece of godlike material deep inside us. We are all trapped in imperfect bodies with imperfect minds that distort communication of that perfection to others. It was her belief that all humans are basically good, it is only our imperfect communication that causes bad things to happen in the world."

Senator John Spearfish rolled his eyes and raised the right cuff of his tailored suit to his mouth. "Let's cut this guy off," he whispered into the microphone attached to his wrist.

The crowd of reporters let out a groan as Joseph Dvorak's head was replaced on the giant screen by a close-up view of Senator Spearfish.

"Are there any more questions for me?" the senator asked from the podium. He

pointed to another attractive female reporter near the front of the room.

"Can you comment on the beliefs of Mr. Dvorak's mother?" the reporter asked.

"I can't comment on her beliefs except to paraphrase Shakespeare by saying that there are more things in heaven and earth than we can ever dream of," the senator said.

"Let me just thank all the people who have worked alongside me to make this dream come true. It took a lot of hard work and dedication from my followers to finally fund the Space Shuttle Program to ensure the safety of its passengers and its availability to all Americans. Thank you."

The senator walked away from the podium and disappeared behind the curtain. Members of the press corps shouted requests for more information about Joseph Dvorak as the senator walked away.

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Joseph Dvorak sat in the Hypobaric Physiological Training and Research Altitude Chamber with tears streaming down his cheeks. It was obvious to the trainer sitting next

to him trainer that Dvorak was suffering from hypoxia, a state of oxygen deficiency in the blood. The pressure in the chamber had been reduced to simulate an altitude of 60,000 feet. Dvorak's oxygen mask had been removed from his face for several minutes to see exactly how he would react to hypoxia. The test was required of all astronauts before being sent into space so they could recognize their own symptoms of hypoxia and increase their oxygen level if needed during their mission in space.

The experienced trainer helping Joseph Dvorak had seen a range of symptoms in subjects he had tested. He had seen everything from complete euphoria evidenced by hysterical laughter to unresponsive lethargy in the form of vacant stares from the subject being tested. In his five years of running tests he had never seen anyone break into the hysterical sobs exhibited by Joseph Dvorak.

The trainer replaced the oxygen mask on the face of his subject and signaled for the pressure in the chamber to be restored. He glanced around the room and saw Senator John Spearfish giggling with glee as his trainer restored the mask to the senator's face.

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Two dozen experts in space travel and astronaut training gathered in the large conference room at Johnson Space Center. The men murmured amongst themselves as they sat around the large natural oak oval-shaped table. The room fell silent as Senator Spearfish entered the room and sat down at the head of the table.

"Let's go over the status of Mr. Dvorak's training," Senator Spearfish said to the training director sitting near him. "Is he going to be ready for the launch in one month?"

The training director addressed the room from his seat near the senator. "Physically we see no problem," he said. "He has really trimmed down in the past two months and has passed all the physical stress tests within the recommended tolerances.

"His mental state, however, is another matter."

"So he shed a few tears in the chamber," the senator said. "Everyone reacts differently in there. I was laughing my ass off myself."

"It's more than that," the director said. "Mr. Dvorak has a history of depression and it has showed up on all of our psychological tests, not just in the hypobaric chamber."

"He seems happy enough when I am around him," the senator said.

"Depression is not really a question of how happy someone appears on the outside," the director said. "It is more a matter of how someone feels about themselves on the inside. Internally Mr. Dvorak sees himself as a failure."

"So what," the senator said. "A trip into outer space ought to boost his confidence don't you think? Especially after he returns home and finds women throwing themselves at him." A soft chuckle arose from some of the men and women seated around the table.

"A trip into space might have just the opposite effect," the director said. "Mr.

Dvorak sees himself as a failure. If he is able to attain one of the highest personal successes a man can dream of, the difference between his self-concept and reality could send him into a dangerous depression."

"Are you worried about his long-term health or are you afraid he might do something to sabotage the mission?" the senator asked.

"The chance of him doing anything to compromise the mission is slim," the director said. "I am more concerned about the long-term mental health. The trip could tear apart his psyche to the point where it could never be restored."

"Can't you put him on some drug to keep him intact until you can start working on him when he gets back?" the senator asked.

"According to his records, Mr. Dvorak did use an anti-depressant for a while after his mother's death," the director said. "The treatment appears to have been successful, although according to the psychiatrist that prescribed the drug, Mr. Dvorak was very uncomfortable taking it and stopped using it as soon as his doctor would allow it."

"Okay," the senator said. "So we drug him up for the trip. Will he still be able to perform the EVA and spread his mother's ashes in space? I think that is going to be a great publicity shot for us. Lottery tickets sales will skyrocket for the next launch, no pun intended."

"He will still be able to perform the EVA," the director said. "I would recommend, however, that he accompanied closely by an experienced astronaut and that extra precautions be taken to ensure he can't hurt himself."

"Any objections to doping him up, shooting him into space and then putting him into treatment when he gets back?" the senator said to the experts around the table. Everyone in the room shook their head in the negative.

"Any other business we need to address here?" the senator asked.

"Just one more thing," the director said. "About your own mental health, are you familiar with the story of what happened to some of the early astronauts that made it to the moon?"

"I haven't really studied their lives," Senator Spearfish replied. "But I met a few of them over the last few years and they seemed like well-adjusted men."

"When those first astronauts stepped on the moon they reached the pinnacle of their lives," the director said. "When they got back to earth, they had nowhere to go but down. They had no more mountains to climb.

"Some of the moon-walkers learned to adjust their expectations for themselves and live within the constraints of the social and physical environment on earth. Others slipped into lives of loneliness, drug and alcohol abuse and depression. Some of them had such a hard time they destroyed their relationships with their wives, friends and families.

"Some were able to recover and lead normal lives after a few years of professional help; others were not so fortunate and ended up broken men. I would just like to warn you to make sure you don't put too much emphasis on what you are doing on this trip."

"I thank you for your advice," the senator replied. "But I am way ahead of you. I plan to make a surprise announcement during the EVA to release the ashes. My announcement should clear up any doubts you have about whether I will be able to find any more mountains to climb in my life."

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Joseph Dvorak felt himself floating out of the plywood mockup of the space shuttle payload bay in the Neutral Buoyancy Laboratory at Johnson Space Center. He awkwardly grasped the plastic urn with the left glove of his Extravehicular Mobility Unit spacesuit as he floated through opening in the payload bay. His trainer, outfitted in scuba gear, floated alongside him.

Joseph craned his neck upwards and peered through the clear visor in his helmet to observe Senator John Spearfish hovering above him next to his own scuba-gear-clad trainer.

"That's right, nice and easy, Joseph," the voice of the Extra Vehicular Activity mission specialist came through the speaker in Joseph's helmet.

The mission specialist floated a few yards in front of the senator. He pointed a mock video camera towards Joseph as he rose above the payload bay.

When Joseph reached the senator he maneuvered into position, unscrewed the top of the mock urn, and feigned distributing the ashes in space.

"At this point I will make my announcement," the senator said. His voice transmitted through the radio communicator in his helmet to the helmets of the other participants in the exercise.

Joseph did not like the idea of the senator stealing thunder away from the release of his mother's ashes into space. He also did not like the proximity of the senator to him during the exercise. Joseph restored the top on the urn and practiced moving away from the senator back to the payload bay.

The team of trainees finished the exercise by returning to the mock payload bay. They repeated the exercises several times before the trainers were satisfied that they were ready for their mission.

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As he floated out of the space shuttle cargo bay into the vast darkness of outer space, Joseph Dvorak felt his heart move into his throat. He felt a slight resistance to his movement away from the shuttle as his safety tether unrolled behind him. He craned his neck and saw the senator waiting for his arrival just as they had practiced in the Neutral Buoyancy Lab.

Joseph could feel the anti-depressant in his blood resisting his attempts to focus on his mission. It was as if the more he tried to concentrate the more the drug decreased the energy level in his brain. He grasped the golden egg-shaped urn in his left hand and held it against the side of his spacesuit as he floated towards the senator.

When he reached the senator, Joseph spun around to face the camera that the EVA mission specialist pointed at him. The taut safety tether kept him from floating any farther away from the shuttle.

"All ready for the ceremony," the EVA mission specialist's voice came through the speakers in his helmet. "Go ahead and say the blessing like we practiced and then spread the ashes."

"And the Lord God formed man out of dust of the earth and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul," Joseph said. "Because thou hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the earth for thy sake. In sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life till thou return unto the earth. For out of the earth wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

Joseph unscrewed the top of the urn until it was nearly detached from the urn's bottom. Suddenly he stretched out his right arm and pushed his glove against the senator's spacesuit. The senator floated away from him. Joseph noticed that he was moving also as his tether stretched out over the space shuttle. He uncapped the urn. A four inch long stainless steel serrated knife floated out of the container. The knife was surrounded by the ashes of his departed mother as it hovered in space.

Joseph grabbed the knife with his right hand, released the urn and then used his left hand to grab the safety tether. He stabilized himself 30 feet away from the senator and the EVA mission specialist. He applied the serrated blade to the tether and began to saw through its plastic coating.

"What are you doing?" the voice of the senator blasted into Joseph's helmet.

"I'm upstaging your little announcement," Joseph replied.

"Put the knife away," the EVA mission specialist said through his communicator.

"I can't do that," Joseph said as he continued to saw through the tether. "My life has been over for a long time. I have just been waiting for the right moment to go out with a bang."

The tether came apart at the point at which he had been sawing. Joseph let go of the tether and grabbed the joystick control for his propulsion unit.

"Don't try to follow me," he said. "I still have the knife and will rip open my suit if anyone approaches me. I would prefer you not try to recover my remains either. I would like to be known as the first man to go out into space and not come back. Top that senator."

Joseph Dvorak moved the joystick on his belt and accelerated away from the shuttle and the two stunned astronauts.

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