



MEDIA ARTICLE - Roberta Bondar

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- John Lownsborough

Roberta Bondar - Passionate Earthling

For eight days in 1992, Dr. Roberta Bondar orbited the Earth aboard NASA's space shuttle Discovery. "Instantaneous disorientation" is how she describes what happens to the human body in zero gravity, "the weirdest thing." Meeting Dr. Bondar, I experienced a little disorientation of my own. My image of her had remained that of someone in a space suit, and the soft-spoken person before me didn't seem quite as large as that image suggested. The diamond-sharp blue eyes, though, definitely conveyed a sense of the grit and precision that have marked her multifaceted career – both up there in space and down here on Earth.

Scientist, physician, Canada's first female astronaut, Dr. Bondar's newest calling is that of nature photographer. Her website (www.robertabondar.com) is entitled Passionate Earthling, and much of that passion for photography is traceable to those eight days in orbit. The awesome vistas as seen from space galvanized her desire to better document Earth's splendours on the ground, but her enthusiasm for photography dates back to her childhood in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont. When Bondar was eight years old, her parents gave her and Barbara, her older sister, Kodak Brownie Hawkeye cameras. That gesture ignited her love affair with the camera. Her work has been honoured with numerous exhibitions as well as two photography books, *Passionate Vision ~ Discovering Canada's National Parks* (Douglas & McIntyre, 2000) and *Canada ~ Landscape of Dreams* (Douglas & McIntyre, 2002).

Parental influence also encouraged an early interest in space. The Bondars encouraged their children to scan the night skies for stars and satellites and the girls liked to watch the Flash Gordon series on television. In their games, Roberta was Flash while Barbara (now a children's author and playwright) played Ming the Merciless. Following her space flight, Roberta sent Barbara a photograph of herself floating weightlessly while holding a card that read: "Ming, Escaped the planet Mongo. Flash."

As a kid, Dr. Bondar was a serious Flash Gordon fan.

Dr. Bondar joined the Canadian space program in 1984. "I think mine was probably the second application in." The journey that took her to outer space, however, was rooted in science and medicine: BSc in zoology and agriculture, MSc in experimental pathology, and PhD in neurobiology; culminating in an MD. She did her residency in neurology, followed with a six-month subspecialty in neuro-ophthalmology at Tufts New England Medical Center in Boston, Mass.

"Vision's always played this huge role," she says of her career. Even before she experienced zero gravity, Dr. Bondar had studied its effects. She noted that



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astronauts returning to Earth experienced certain symptoms that mirrored particular neurological conditions. As the world's first neurologist to become an astronaut, she is renowned for her research in space medicine.

These days, her schedule includes the photography – she's currently shooting the world's deserts, and the last time we spoke she was off to Qatar – as well as frequent speaking engagements. She sees her role as primarily that of an educator, "pulling things together" and "trying to make people think." Recently reappointed Chancellor of Trent University in Peterborough, Ont., she's also working with corporations in devising a program called HyperThink™, designed to assist employees overwhelmed by change, be it in governance or new technology.

Dr. Bondar, who turned 60 in December 2005, has never regretted paths not taken. "We constantly change. Every morning we wake up with a different physiology from the day before. Life's a journey. Basically we're just hanging out and seeing what we can do with what we have." She adds, "I can't imagine not exploring oneself. It's as important as exploring outside ourselves."

Certainly hers was – and is still – quite a journey.