

By GEORGE ROBERTSON, M.D.

What is it that trips the circuit in your brain when you realize that the world around you is a really big place? I've had this experience many times and it's usually associated with observing or trying to think about vastness.

Probably the first time for me occurred in my teen years when I looked at the stars with some comprehension as to their distances from us. Being able to do this at a young age I feel is unusual since for the most part of our young lives we have been fixed on personal needs and the force of self-survival which surrounds us.

The first detachment from our parents is traumatic for most and for some even in later years causes an inward feeling of loss. It's not until we actually realize that we can make it on our own that we get comfortable with the strange world without relational support.

It is in this context, I think, that we first look at the stars in awe and feel the loneliness the distances demand. Up until then we are number one and afterward, with a sudden breathless awareness, we are number one in 1 billion -- or a number so large that we cannot imagine it. The first picture of our planet from the astronauts on their way to the moon was both beautiful and frightening. The smallness of our safety net in this universe jumped out at me as I saw the beauty of the clouds partially covering the blue oceans and the small green splotches of land. To know that I was somewhere way down there made me wonder about my importance in life and even question my need for existence.

This feeling surfaced again on a recent flight to Honduras when the largeness of reality of those things around me on the ground suddenly disappeared into obscurity as our plane climbed to 5 miles above the earth. First, the people on the ground disappeared as the plane ascended over Nashville, then the cars became dots as the houses were squished into suburbs and the streets to spiderwebs of strands so thin and fragile they could only be seen by the first light of the new sunrise.

The haze and clouds obliterated even the largest ground topography leaving me suspended in

thin air and puffy white billows that looked more substantial than the earth below.

We would be going about 2,000 miles into a foreign culture where most of us couldn't even communicate. It would be a different type of aloneness for those on their first trip abroad but the feelings of separation would be lessened by being in a group of 28 all with a common bond and speaking the same language of compassion.

There was also the technical support of phones that would keep us in contact with home, albeit rarely used and difficult to connect at times. The respite was that it was only a week-long trip and barring adversity we would be right back where we started from soon enough and hopefully not missing anything important back home.

Editor's Note: George Robertson is a physician with Family Medical Associates, PC, in Lebanon.