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TOP STORY

## GUEST COLUMN: Total eclipse provided a welcome distraction

By Richard Eckstrom Guest Columnist Sep 5, 2017



Justin Chou and Patricia Gu look up at the sun during the eclipse in Monetta on Aug. 21.

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Staff photo by Christina Cleveland

For a period of a few weeks, the news seemed like it couldn't get any worse. North Korean military exercises triggered new fears of nuclear war. Racism and violence in Virginia shook the country. Protests by so-called "anti-fascists" resulted in assaults on law enforcement officers. Statues and monuments were being destroyed. To top it off, the almost constant partisan bickering in Washington has been enough to make one wonder whether politicians are up to solving even routine issues – let alone our most daunting crises.

But for a moment on Aug. 21, a rare heavenly occurrence provided welcome relief from the headlines.

It was a solar eclipse of a magnitude not seen in over a century. The sun, moon and earth lined up perfectly and, in about an hour and a half, the moon's shadow sped across the landscape of the United States. A narrow sliver of the country from Oregon to South Carolina experienced almost night-time darkness as the moon blotted out the mid-afternoon sun for a couple minutes. (And, importantly, there was a welcome drop in temperature!)

In a fleeting instant, Americans of all walks of life paused from their daily routines, looked skyward, and marveled at the cosmic performance. People gathered in parking lots, back yards and rooftops, and motorists pulled over to stop and view the phenomenon as it unfolded. Teens looked up from their smart-gadgets. Even some who were initially lukewarm about the historical event admitted they found it awe-inspiring.

Those of us who are older may have recalled how the early days of space exploration captivated America. I thought back to the excitement from the Apollo 8 mission that orbited the moon in 1968, circling it on Christmas Eve while the crew members sent radio transmissions back to earth describing the incredible earthrise appearing before them above the moon's horizon, while they reverentially read from the first chapter of Genesis the account of God creating the heavens and the earth.

That mission was followed within months by our country's first moon landing during which Neil Armstrong became the first person to step onto the lunar landscape. Events like these unleashed our imagination and stirred our quest to discover bigger things, while at the same time underscoring the enormity of the frontier we faced.

Like the early moon missions, the eclipse offered perspective. It was, as those missions were, a reminder of how tiny we are relative to the universe.

August 21 was a particularly special time for South Carolina. The “path of totality” – a 70-mile wide path in which the moon completely blocked the sun from our view – moved from the mountains to the sea across our state. Hundreds of thousands of visitors, some that I met from as far away as Bulgaria, came to get incredible seats to the solar system’s impressive show.

The once-in-a-lifetime chance to marvel at this sight attracted people of varied ages, races, and stations in life. For me, I’ll never forget how amazed I felt realizing that I was observing immense heavenly bodies moving at courses and speeds that were set for them “in the beginning.”

I’ll also fondly remember Aug. 21 as a welcome distraction from the current state of affairs. However briefly, we all gazed up at the same spot in the sky, shoulder-to-shoulder, filled with awe. It was an occasion that’s easy to appreciate in a time when we’re so often defined more by our differences than by our shared bonds.

*Richard Eckstrom is a CPA and the state’s Comptroller.*