

another Velcro strap, to allow your neck to relax. If you don't tuck your arms into the bag, they drift out in front of you. Sometimes you wake up in the morning to see an arm floating in front of your face and think, "Whoa! What is that?" until you realize it's yours.

On most of my flights, I slept in the airlock, in the mid-deck of the shuttle. Nobody worked in there when we weren't doing an EVA (extra-vehicular activity), so it was like my own private bedroom. The downside? It was also the coldest part of the shuttle by about 20 degrees. I would tuck my arms into the bag and wear four layers of clothes; sometimes I'd warm up a package of food in the oven and throw it in my sleeping bag like a hot-water bottle. On the last two nights of my final flight, I slept on the flight deck, my sleeping bag strapped beneath the overhead windows. The position of the shuttle put Earth in those windows, so when I woke up the whole world was out there in front of me—in that moment, just for me alone.

The most amazing thing about my spaceflights was how relaxing they were. New astronauts get so worried about fulfilling their duties that they sometimes get hours or days into a mission before stopping to watch the sun rise, even though it happens 16 times a day on orbit. Shuttle flights were always busy—experiments, daily maintenance, EVAs, robotic operations. It was incredibly hard work, stressful in its own way, and scary—if you screwed up, you screwed up with people all over the world watching. But at the same time I found it all very relaxing. When you travel on Earth, you're almost never out of touch. Anyone can reach you if they need to. But going to space, you are *really* out of reach. You have comm with the ground and email, sure, but there's not much you can do about those everyday worries: Did I pay the bills? Did I feed the dog? I felt like everyday things just stopped at the edge of the atmosphere. I was totally liberated from Earth. But all those earthly concerns reattached as soon as we reentered. By the time I landed, my brain was mapping out a to-do list.

I never got sick going to space, but I never felt great coming home. When you return, your inner ear—which keeps you balanced on Earth and which has been essentially turned off for the duration of your trip—feels a little gravity and becomes unbelievably sensitive. Your balance is off and you have to relearn how to move in a gravity field. If I turned my head, I would fall over. Muscles you haven't used in weeks have to reengage to help you do everyday stuff like walk, stand, and hold things. It can take days or weeks to get your Earth legs back.

It was hard, it was exciting, it was scary, it was indescribable. And yes, I'd go back in a heartbeat. ■■