



Pearson

Pearson: Dare to learn. Dare to change

Adam Steltzner's Story

ADAM: I have completely convinced myself, my teachers, my parents that I had no academic prowess. And later, I would crush it.

ADAM: My name is Adam Steltzner. I design and help in the process of building spacecraft that go to other planets. I lived in England for a little tiny bit in a relatively rural area. The vicar who was the headmaster of the one room school house told my brother and my parents that your boy's more set for the trades. Maybe he'd be a good ditch digger. In my twenties, I was playing rock and roll in the San Francisco Bay area. I was bored, working in a health food store and one night returning home from playing a show, I noticed that the stars were in a different place in the night sky than they had been when I went out to the show. I had not paid attention in high school. I've missed the whole Earth spinning on its axis thing and I became curious and kind of on a lark, kind of because I was bored, I decided to follow that curiosity and I went down to the local community college and I signed up for an astronomy course to teach me why the stars were moving. It had associated with it a physics course. That physics course blew my mind. It opened this window to the fact that the world, the universe, is governed by a few laws, a few things to understand. Handful, really on the fingers of your, of your two hands, you can pretty much write down the governing equations that determine how the universe is going to react. The idea that I could understand that really turned me on.

ADAM: When I first started in to school for real, really as an adult, I struggled. Oh my God, did I struggle. Because I had no skills. Honestly, I haven't really even developed a sharp method of thinking. I needed a calculator. And the calculator I wanted was a HP15C, it cost \$80. This is in 1985. \$80 in '85 for a guy who works playing rock and roll and works in a health food store is a lot of money. And so I would do this big gut check. Are you going to really commit to this? Because it's a lot of money. And I said yes. It's not an easy transition, but boy, it's a big one. I mean, it's natural. It's a life changer. I'm not playing rock and roll, I'm building spacecraft to explore our solar system.

ADAM: When I look back and ask what was in the way of me studying as a youth, it was my fear of being vulnerable. It was only as an adult in my twenties where I dug deep enough, was strong enough to be able to feel weak enough to say, I don't know. I don't know. I don't know that. I mean literally I do that in rooms filled with PHD rocket scientists from around the world and we figure it out together. New things. It takes the curiosity, which we all have as human beings, and the willingness to be vulnerable about the fact that you don't know.

ADAM: I've put an unusual number of spacecraft on the surface of Mars. I was thrown into this group of people who were trying to land the Mars exploration rovers. I ended up being in charge of the mechanical engineering for the landing system. I'm building this thing, I'm helping design it. We're trying to figure out all these problems. You launch it, months go by, then we get the first images, and for me it was the images, the very first images from the spacecraft, a new place in our solar system brought to us by blood, sweat, and tears of all these women and men would work together to make it happen. And literally, I was in tears. I would never, ever have dreamed of being part of it, let alone maybe a big part of it. And so, to have been able to contribute to land spacecraft and, right now, the chief engineer of the next major expedition on the surface of Mars. I mean, kind of an amazing transition from a cashier at a health food store, playing rock and roll on the weekends to rocket scientist building spacecraft. You never know where your life will take you if you follow your curiosity.