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By Jon Sapper
Pluto

Eighty-five years ago a Kansas farmer by the name of Clyde Tombaugh was looking through his telescope and noticed a dim light. Looking at how all the other things in outer space work, he noticed this was different, and soon realized he had discovered another planet circling the sun. That planet was named Pluto. It's a lot smaller than earth and actually amazing anyone can see it. With stronger telescopes, five moons around Pluto have been identified looking like fuzzy little dots of uncertain size and shape.

In 1992, astronomers and the folks who spend time looking at these things decided Pluto wasn't a real planet. They called Pluto a dwarf planet and the moons, plutoids. A plutoid sounds like something kind of uncomfortable, but these scientists do enjoy "being out there."

Many of these scientists are brilliant and with a passion for stretching the boundaries of space, they said, why don't we send a space craft to Pluto to take some pictures and send them back? Now mind you, this is over 3 billion miles away. That's 6 million round trips to San Francisco and would take you as long to complete as it will for the 49'ers to win their next Super Bowl. Anyway, the New Horizon's spaceship was launched in January 2006, headed for Pluto.

Just prior to launch, these scientists predicted how long it would take to get there. They miscalculated.....it got their sooner,.....by one minute. ONE MINUTE! I can't be that accurate driving from my home to Starbucks, less than 3 miles away. And the space craft travelling at 30,000 miles per hour, passed by Pluto last week less than 8,000 miles above the surface. That truly is nothing but amazing. Initial high resolution pictures coming back indicate Pluto has steep mountains as high as 11,000 feet and an icy surface that confirms the bedrock that made the mountains must be from water. One scientist said, "We can be really sure that the water in there is in great abundance."

The space craft is expected to reconnect with scientists in Maryland tomorrow and start transmitting 10 years of data. This will take 16 months to complete.

This is truly a huge scientific accomplishment, confirming that the most complex technological challenges can be solved.

It's unfortunate though, that what defines us as being human, also makes it nearly impossible to show equal progress in solving the most basic social challenges that we face.

This has been Jon Sapper for Community Comment.