

Mars is the wrong colour

No longer seeing red.

Ian Randal Strock

There's a difference between a conspiracy and what Margaret Mead called "a small group of thoughtful, committed people". The former will always fail, because someone will give it away. The latter, as Mead said, "can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Many ventures fail not for a bad idea or poor planning, but because the wrong group of people is involved. I'd learned that time and again in my organizing efforts: fan groups, idealistic businesses and even social organizations that sputtered along but eventually collapsed because the people involved didn't mesh well, or didn't have the right skill sets.

This time, I vowed, it would be different. This time, my goal dwarfed all the others, and required far more commitment and cohesion among the people I'd be gathering to carry out the plan. So I went slowly. I didn't start with public pronouncements or marketing campaigns or mass appeals to everyone I knew.

Instead, I found people of like mind through quiet, one-on-one conversations. I found my potential collaborators at scientific conferences, through friends and business acquaintances and, in one instance, a call out of the blue to an author who wrote something in a story that resonated with me.

It was a large group for a conspiracy, but a small number of people to carry out such a grandiose plan. And this one time, finally, I knew before I asked that they would all say yes. I convinced my double handful of potential co-conspirators to get together at a quiet resort during the off-season. They all said yes to the first date I proposed.

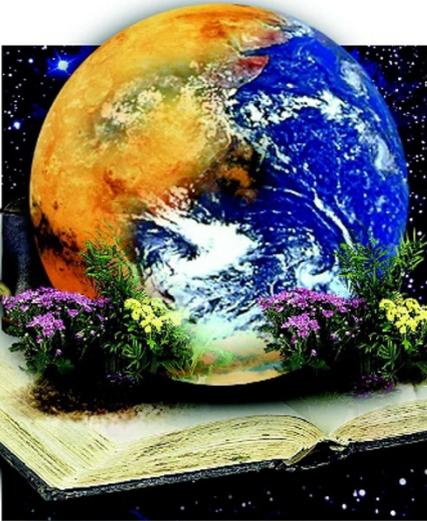
After the introductions were out of the way, I think they all realized I had something larger in mind than a social gathering. I stood up, and everyone else fell silent, looking at me with anticipation.

"Mars is the wrong colour," I said. "After so many missions looking for life, I think we can be fairly certain that there is none on Mars. There may once have been, but there's nothing now, and the environment won't permit anything we'd recognize as life to grow."

There were nods of agreement around the room, and an encouraging, "Yes, go on."

"We can keep going as we have been, sending probes to Mars every two years to investigate smaller and smaller possibilities, or we can gather a small group of people," I looked around the room with purpose, and knew they were the right crowd, because every one of them met my eyes and smiled, "and admit there's no life, but that it's time to start seeding it."

"NASA is launching the Firebird in a year. It will be a successor to the Phoenix, with a soil laboratory, a digging arm and mobility."



It was definitely the right crowd. I didn't have to finish the concept before someone else said: "The Flora experiment. We'll need to co-opt it, make it smaller and lighter than the programme integrators expect."

"Then we can take the extra space and put what in it?"

"Extremophiles. Some sort of microbes that will be happy in the current Martian environment, and which will excrete —"

"The oxygen and ozone we need to transform the environment."

"Someone will notice."

"By then, it'll be too late to stop the process. If word doesn't get out, the rest of the world may assume it's a natural process."

"Or a miracle."

"But we'll know better."

"We won't have a living Mars to visit, nor will our grandchildren."

"No, but *their* grandchildren will. Governments move too slowly, and don't think far enough ahead."

"Better a second habitable planet in a bunch of generations than none at all."

"If we're caught ..."

"What? No country I know has a law against terraforming Mars."

"But they'll come up with something. Theft of government services? Deceit? Lying to a federal agency?"

"Then we'll pay a fine or go to jail."

"But Mars will live."

"What do we call the project?"

"If there's a name, there will be something to give us away. Something to let slip."

"Don't use your government e-mail accounts to talk about this with anyone."

We broke up into working groups. One to decide which microbes to send. Another to build their flight compartment. Yet another to redesign Flora to make room for our unannounced package. And those who would be inspecting the craft before launch, who were necessary to overlook our modifications. By the end of the weekend, we came back together, and we had a workable plan. The scheduling was going to be tight, but that only meant less time for our plot to be discovered and stopped.

We all left that weekend vowing to carry out our plan without telling a soul: not our spouses, not our children, and leave not a word in our wills. What we were doing, we were doing for all humanity.

I organized the group: that was my contribution. I'm not a scientist, not a biologist, I don't work for NASA, and I had nothing more to do with any of the project members. But ego is a funny thing. As the organizer, I feel a certain responsibility to them, to let the world know that there is hope; the hope of another planet for our grandchildren's grandchildren, if only we can keep ourselves alive long enough for Mars to be ready. Firebird will land on Mars very soon; there's nothing anyone can do now to stop the process, short of nuking Mars, but that's not going to happen. So I've written this story.

Keep looking up, and tell your children. There will come a time when Mars is no longer the red planet. Watch for the white clouds, the blue water and the green life. It's coming. ■

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