

Lessons In Leadership

An Interview with Dr. Bernard A. Harris Jr., Managing Partner and Chief Executive Officer, Vesalius Ventures, Inc.

EDITORS' NOTE Dr. Bernard Harris is Chief Executive Officer and Managing Partner of Vesalius Ventures, Inc., a venture capital firm that invests in early to mid-stage healthcare technologies and companies. As CEO, he is responsible for managing a portfolio of private assets of early and mid-stage venture investments and operating companies. Prior to Vesalius Ventures, Harris worked with Vanguard Ventures, a \$500 million early-stage venture capital

firm focused on life sciences, information technology and telecommunications. He led the company's emerging VC accelerator in telemedicine for 6 years. Harris is also a veteran Astronaut and President of the Harris Foundation, a nonprofit organization that focuses on education, health and wealth initiatives. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Biology from the University of Houston, a Master of Medical Science from the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, a Master of Business Administration from the University of Houston Clear Lake, and a Doctorate of Medicine from Texas Tech University School of Medicine. Harris was a Mission Specialist on the Space Shuttle Columbia in 1993 and Payload Commander on Space Shuttle Discovery in 1995. As Payload Commander on Space Shuttle Discovery STS-63 in 1995, he served on the first flight of the joint Russian-American Space Program, becoming the first African American to walk in space. A veteran astronaut for more than 20 years, he has logged more than 438 hours and traveled over 7.2 million miles in space. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including honorary doctorates from Stony Brook University (SUNY), Morehouse School of Medicine, New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT), and the University of Hartford, as well as the NASA Space Flight Medal, a NASA Award of Merit, a fellow of the American College of Physicians, and the 2000 Horatio Alger Award.



Dr. Bernard A. Harris Jr.

Medicine. In 1985, I completed a residency in Internal Medicine at the Mayo Clinic, followed by a National Research Council Fellowship in Endocrinology at the NASA Ames Research Center in 1987, and trained as a Flight Surgeon at the Aerospace School of Medicine, Brooks Air Force Base in 1989.

Since 1986, I have served the space program at NASA Ames Space Flight Center, NASA Johnson Space Flight Center, and NASA Headquarters in various roles, including research scientist, flight surgeon, astronaut, and

advisor. My career has encompassed both in-flight and non-flight contributions to NASA, supporting spaceflight missions, space medicine, and research in the advancement of human space flight. My first Spacelab mission flight was as a Mission Specialist for STS-55 in April 1993. I was a payload crew member of Spacelab D-2, conducting over 90 investigations in physical and life sciences. As the Crew Medical Officer, I performed the first physical examination in space, the first telemedicine conference from space, and administered the first intravenous infusion (IV) on humans in space.

My second flight was for STS-63 in February 1995 as Payload Commander. This was the first flight of the new joint Russian-American Space Program. Mission highlights included the first rendezvous with the Mir, conducting over 48 investigations in the SpaceHab module, and the deployment and retrieval of Spartan 204. I became the first African American to walk in space during the EVA, which tested new thermal protection devices for the spacesuits, used a new electronic EVA checklist, conducted mass handling of the 3,000-pound Spartan satellite, and evaluated EVA tools in preparation for the ISS. I logged 198 hours, 29 minutes, 129 orbits, and 2.9 million miles in space.

After leaving NASA in 1996, I was hired as the SVP of Medical Science and Chief Medical Officer for SpaceHab, one of the first commercial-based spaceflight companies. In 1998, I founded the Harris Foundation and Institute. We have been involved in math and science education for over 25 years. In 2002, I founded Vesalius Ventures, a venture capital firm focused on telemedicine and healthcare technologies. I currently serve as the CEO and Managing Partner, responsible for managing a portfolio of private assets, including early and mid-stage venture investments and operating companies.

When did you know that you had a passion for space and wanted to become an astronaut?

My interest in space began in middle school with my love of science and science fiction. During that period, I watched the development of the space program unfold right before my eyes. It started with the race to space between the United States and the Soviet Union following the successful flight of Yuri Gagarin, the first human in space. This ultimately led to the Apollo program and a 13-year-old boy watching the lunar landing. The words of Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," inspired me to follow in their footsteps.

Will you provide an overview of Vesalius Ventures and how you define its mission?

Founded in June 2002, Vesalius Ventures is dedicated to accelerating the future of medicine by becoming the premier conduit for enabling technologies that transform healthcare. Vesalius Ventures is uniquely positioned to access emerging technologies at their source and bring exciting new opportunities to market from around the world. The strategy of Vesalius Ventures involves utilizing the expertise and experience gained over the years in medical information and technology (telemedicine) to create a distinguished investment firm, focusing on early to mid-stage companies that require both equity capital and management assistance to achieve success. Advances in medical technology, telecommunications, and information technologies will be embraced for the delivery of healthcare. Creating novel business opportunities, identifying innovative technologies, and capitalizing on attractive market opportunities with tremendous potential growth are the goals of Vesalius Ventures.

Vesalius Ventures was established through an investment from three venture and corporate partners: Vanguard Ventures, Fremont Ventures, and Guidant Corporation (now Boston Scientific). This group was joined a year later by Sevin Rosen Funds. During the subsequent years of the accelerator's operations, the firm attracted the attention of other companies eager to develop new opportunities in telemedicine through client relationships. In 2008, Opal Ventures and Vesalius formed a partnership to bring medical technologies from Israel and Europe to the U.S. market. This partnership created a unique opportunity for Vesalius to expand its investment portfolio.

Will you highlight your career journey?

I earned a Bachelor of Science in Biology from the University of Houston, a Master of Medical Science from the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, an MBA from the University of Houston, and a Doctorate of Medicine from Texas Tech University School of

In 2022, Vesalius Ventures celebrated its 20th anniversary in business. The firm's efforts were validated during the COVID-19 pandemic when patients and providers had limited engagement, bringing the use of telehealth and telemedicine to the forefront of healthcare in the U.S. and around the world.

Will you discuss the work of the Harris Institute/Foundation?

The Harris Institute/Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded to serve socially and economically disadvantaged communities both locally and across the nation, striving to reach the most underserved populations in education, health, and wealth. We utilize our "Pillars of Success" to empower students and communities throughout the nation and the world. The Harris Institute/Foundation was established to advance the mission of creating community-based initiatives that:

- enhance the quality of education;
- improve health and well-being;
- create and sustain wealth.

We empower individuals and communities who are underserved, underrepresented, and/or socioeconomically disadvantaged to recognize their potential and pursue their dreams. The Harris Institute's initiatives are administered by The Harris Foundation, Inc., through the creation of innovative programs. Through "Policies in Action," we are addressing critical issues facing America and developing programs for change.

What has made philanthropic work so special for you and how do you decide where to focus your efforts?

Giving back is very important to me. Given my early background and childhood, where my family struggled financially and dealt with divorce in Houston, Texas, I learned how education can change one's trajectory and provide options for life. As a graduate of Prairie View A&M University, my mother chose to create a better life for her children. She secured a job as a teacher with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) on the Navajo Nation in Arizona and New Mexico. This transformed our living environment into a more positive and hopeful existence. If she could do this for our family, then why not for others? Education was the foundation for change and advancement. Thus, my philanthropy focuses on supporting access to high-quality STEM education for all, particularly for those who are socially and economically disadvantaged.

What interested you in writing the book, *Embracing Infinite Possibilities: Letting Go of Fear to Find Your Highest Potential*, and what are the key messages you wanted to convey in the book?

All of us have faced external challenges at some point in our lives. Liberation comes when you realize just how unimportant these things truly are. Then, you will no longer perceive the world around you as hostile and unforgiving. This reality will free you to be who you truly are. There is great power in this realization – self-endowed power that releases you from the burden of self-doubt. There is no greater power in the world, save for that of God. This is, in fact, the truth that God desires for each of us. In recognizing our own strength, we become an integral part of something greater than ourselves.

One of my lifelong goals is to inspire and motivate others. *Embracing Infinite Possibilities* aims to expand on these ideas by serving as a roadmap to uncover the power within each of us. If we are students of the universe, it is evident to me that each of us must discover this power within to find our own way and in our own time – some through life's experiences, some through reading, others by observing, being taught, or through self-study. I encourage the reader to find their own path. The hope of this book, as a companion to my

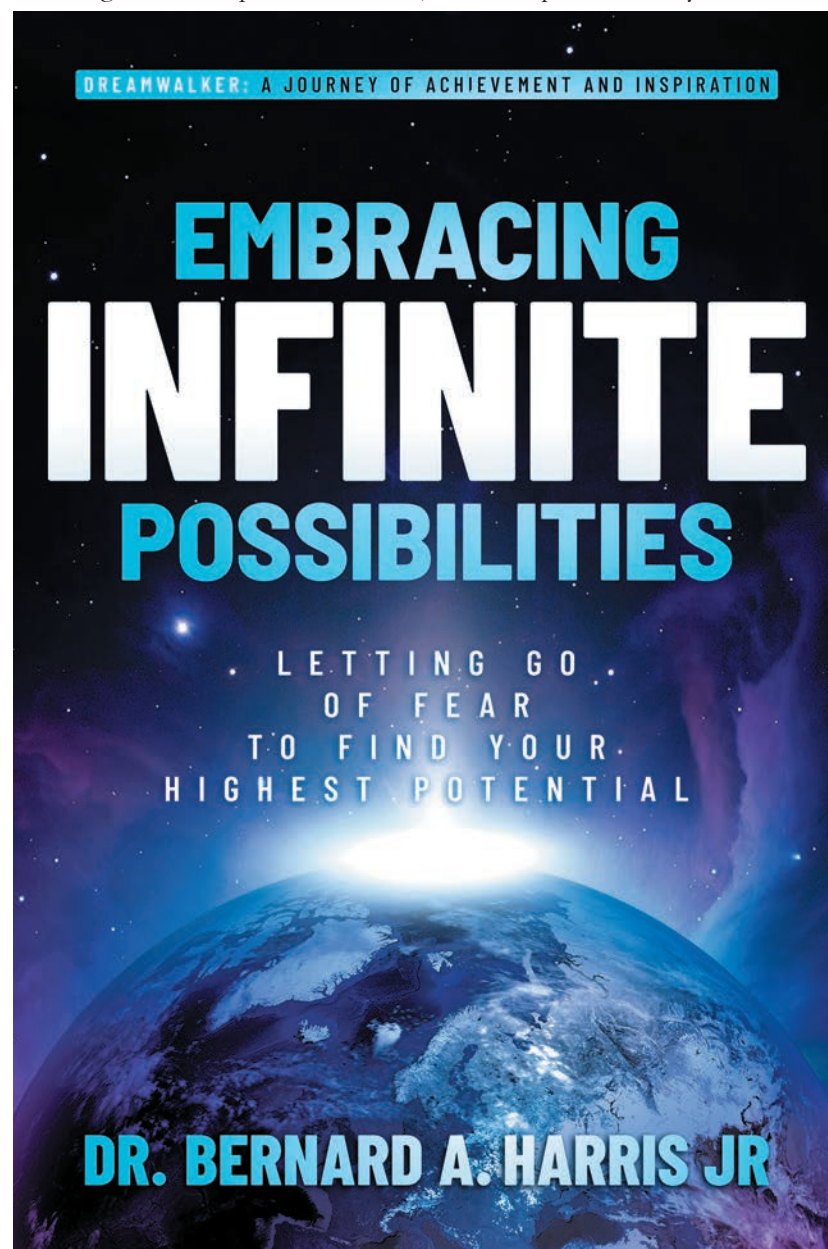
first, is to open your mind to the infinite possibilities of life.

We are infinite beings with infinite possibilities. We are born multipotential and multi-talented – and for a reason. There are no accidents in birth. We are capable of achieving great things in life. That potential is only limited by our inability to perceive ourselves as the infinite beings we truly are. Part of this infiniteness consists of our ability to tap into the one source of power that drives the universe. There are forces greater than ourselves that surround us and flow through us. The simple truth is that we each have a role to play in the cosmic dance. *Embracing Infinite Possibilities* will provide insights for your self-discovery – the power within. I am sharing my journey through an honest discussion of my struggles, ambitions, hopes, and dreams as a testament to the voyage we all undertake with the desire to help others discover their inner power.

What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership, and how do you approach your management style?

Every great leader starts with a vision. Whether you are leading a company, a team, or a personal endeavor, the ability to see beyond present circumstances and chart a course for the future separates extraordinary leaders from the rest. When I first dreamed of becoming an astronaut, I had no roadmap. The path ahead was filled with uncertainty, doubt, and obstacles. But I learned early on that leadership is not about having all the answers; it is about having the courage to pursue a vision, adapt to challenges, and inspire others along the way. In business, just as in space exploration, those who succeed are the ones who remain focused on their mission despite adversity.

One of the most valuable lessons in leadership is understanding that failure is not the enemy – complacency is. Some of the best business leaders I've met share one trait: they are not afraid of failing. They see failure as feedback, a necessary component of growth. It is about embracing failure as a tool for success. During my astronaut training, I faced countless setbacks. Physical tests pushed me to my limits, technical challenges forced me to rethink strategies, and high-stakes simulations exposed weaknesses I needed to improve. Had I let failure define me, I would never have made it to space. Instead, I used each failure as a learning opportunity, refining my skills and strengthening my resolve. Remember that the key to success lies not in avoiding obstacles, but in using them as stepping-stones to greater achievements.



As a leader in life and in business, resilience is just as crucial. Markets change, competitors arise, and setbacks occur. The leaders who thrive are those who adapt, learn, and continue forward with an unwavering commitment to their goals.

In managing people, setting high expectations drives high performance. People and organizations rise to the level of expectations set for them. Leaders who expect mediocrity will receive just that, while those who challenge their teams to push beyond limits foster excellence.

Leadership is a journey of resilience, vision, and continuous growth. The most successful leaders are those who embrace challenges, set high expectations, remain adaptable, and focus on the greater impact of their work.

With all that you have accomplished in your career, are you able to enjoy the process and celebrate the wins?

Yes, without a doubt. I have led a full life filled with exploration and adventure through the many careers I have been fortunate to pursue. My greatest reward has been sharing this life with my family and friends.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

Everyone's path to self-discovery is different. You may not walk in space, but your journey is just as significant. The key is to take that first step – to ask yourself who you are, what you want, and what's holding you back. When you do, you'll begin to see that your place in the world has been waiting for you all along.

The importance of knowing yourself: To truly find your place in the world, you must know who you are. This means taking time for self-reflection and being honest about your strengths, weaknesses, and passions. On February 9, 1995, I stepped out of the Space Shuttle Discovery's airlock and into the history books as the first African American to walk in space. At that moment, I was simply fulfilling a childhood dream, but I later realized the profound significance of that step – not just for myself, but for many others. Looking down at Earth from space, I gained a perspective that changed my life forever. In that vastness, I saw not only my place in the universe, but also the boundless potential within all of us.

The power of perspective: As I floated in space, my belief in a higher power was reaffirmed. I felt deeply connected to the world below and understood that each of us has a place in this vast universe. You don't need to go to space to experience this realization. It can happen anywhere – through introspection, faith, or a shift in perspective.

Finding your place in the world is an essential step toward fulfillment. Many of us struggle



Bernard Harris in a space suit

with self-doubt, influenced by societal expectations and external pressures. The question is, how do we break free from these limitations and embrace our full potential?

The journey to finding purpose: Many of us spend our lives searching for meaning, wondering what our true calling is. For some, the path is clear early on, while for others, it takes years of trial and error to uncover what truly fulfills them. No matter where you are on this journey, discovering your purpose is one of the most rewarding and transformative experiences of life. When I was a child, I didn't fully understand what my calling would be, but I knew I wanted to do something extraordinary. Watching Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walk on the moon in 1969 ignited something within me – a deep fascination with space and exploration. Yet, even with that spark, I had doubts. Could a Black kid from a small town become an astronaut? The journey to finding my calling wasn't immediate, but it was fueled by curiosity, resilience, and a willingness to pursue my dreams despite uncertainty.

Listening to your inner voice: One of the first steps in finding your calling is listening to that inner voice – the one that whispers (or sometimes shouts) what excites you, what gives you energy, and what makes you feel truly alive. Too often, we silence this voice because of fear, external expectations, or societal pressures. But the truth is, your passion is a guidepost pointing you toward your purpose. Think

back to your childhood – what did you love to do? What subjects, activities, or dreams made you lose track of time? Sometimes, our earliest interests hold clues to our true calling. Other times, new experiences later in life reveal unexpected passions. The key is to stay open and pay attention to what resonates with you.

Overcoming doubts and external pressures: Self-doubt and external pressures are some of the biggest obstacles to discovering and pursuing our calling. When I shared my dream of becoming an astronaut, there were plenty of skeptics. Some people doubted me because of my background, while others thought the odds were simply too great. Even I had moments of uncertainty – was I really capable of achieving such a lofty goal? Doubt is a natural part of the journey, but it shouldn't dictate your choices. If you let fear and skepticism guide you, you'll never take the necessary risks to achieve something greater. Instead of allowing others to define your limits, challenge them. Push beyond what seems possible and prove, first to yourself and then to others, that you are capable of more than you imagined.

Finding meaning in challenges: The road to discovering your calling is rarely smooth. Challenges and failures are inevitable, but they are also valuable teachers. Every setback I faced – whether in medical school, astronaut training, or my entrepreneurial ventures – taught me something essential about myself. Resilience, adaptability, and persistence are the keys to staying on course, even when the journey is difficult. Think of challenges as refining tools rather than roadblocks. Each experience, whether positive or negative, shapes you into the person you need to become. Rather than fearing failure, embrace it as part of the learning process. Every challenge brings you one step closer to clarity and purpose.

Aligning passion with impact: A true calling isn't just about personal fulfillment – it's about making an impact. The most meaningful careers and paths in life often involve contributing to something greater than ourselves. Whether you're drawn to medicine, education, business, or the arts, the impact you have on others will deepen your sense of purpose. For me, becoming an astronaut wasn't just about traveling to space – it was about inspiring others to dream bigger. Later in life, my calling evolved beyond space exploration into mentoring young people, advocating for STEM education, and helping others unlock their potential. Purpose isn't always static; it can shift and expand as you grow. Ask yourself: How does what I love doing help others? The intersection of passion and service is often where true purpose is found. ●