

***Hidden Figures* – Discussion Questions**



1. Many of the women who began working for NACA were expecting temporary work by filling shortages left by men fighting in World War II, but these women went on to achieve long-term employment and make significant contributions to the fields of aeronautics and astronautics. Has anything in your life ever seemed small or inconsequential at first, only to make a larger impact you didn't expect?
2. Shetterly writes that Dorothy Vaughan "welcomed the chance to prove herself in a competitive academic arena." Do you think this attitude served her well at Langley? What strategies and attitudes did the other women in West Computing use to face challenges both of race and science?
3. Mary Jackson refused to let the children's choir sing "Pick a Bale of Cotton" when she realized that the song reinforced stereotypes about what African Americans could or couldn't do. Shetterly writes "Sometimes, she [Mary] knew, the most important battles for dignity, pride, and progress were fought with the simplest of actions." How do you think simple actions like this affect perceptions about others and about ourselves? Can you give an example of any other small/simple battles fought and won by the women in West Computing? What was the effect of these battles on their dignity, pride, and progress?
4. When President Kennedy set a goal of sending a man to the moon, Shetterly writes that "every NASA employee involved with the space program...broke out in a cold sweat. The agency hadn't yet achieved its mandate to place a human into orbit, and Kennedy already had them kicking up Moon dust?" What strategies did the NASA employees use to approach this seemingly impossible task? Have you ever had a goal in life that seemed impossible? How did you approach the problem?
5. NASA employees were greatly motivated to extend America's reach into space after Sputnik's launch during the Space Race. Astronauts like Frank Borman have since

described America's early space exploration as "a battle in the Cold War." Do you think America's efforts to put a man into orbit and on the moon leave a legacy for modern day space exploration? Is it still important? Why or why not?

6. When actress Nichelle Nichols was thinking about resigning from her job portraying Lieutenant Uhura in *Star Trek*, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. convinced her otherwise, arguing that black people had been imagined in the future and that her role brought to life the equality they were fighting for in the real world. Shetterly goes on to write that Katherine Johnson "thought science – and space – was the ideal place for talented people of any background. The results were what mattered...math was either right or wrong, and if you got it right, it didn't matter what color you were." In the grand scheme of things, how do you think the sciences and the arts worked together to secure more equality for African Americans? Does imagination impact reality, or does an existing reality impact the worlds we imagine?

7. Shetterly writes "Being on the leading edge of integration was not for the faint of heart." If you had been in their shoes, do you think you could have faced and overcome the same challenges as the women in West Computing? Were these women born courageous, or do you think they became so after facing challenges at Langley and in day-to-day segregated life?

8. *Hidden Figures* became a *New York Times* bestseller, inspired a major motion picture, and has been read and discussed by readers of all ages and backgrounds. Why do you think stories like this are so popular? Why are they so important to read and understand?

9. From SpaceX to the Parker Solar Probe to the Aqua satellite currently orbiting Earth, we've come a long way in the study and exploration of space since the moon landing. We know more about space than we ever have before, but phenomena like eclipses, black holes, and supernovae still fascinate us. Why do you think that is? Is there anything about outer space that you think puts life on earth into perspective? Is there anything that blows your mind?