

Go Boldly  
February 25, 2018  
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Now, if you know anything about me, you know that I am a huge Trekkie.

You see, I grew up on a steady diet of Star Trek, I dressed up as Star Trek characters while I was growing up for Halloween, I completed a project to watch all Star Trek episodes and movies in internal chronological order (yes, that's over 700 episodes) which took me over four years to complete. And I am such a big Star Trek fan that it's possible I have a tattoo in Vulcan (which is a language from Star Trek) that says "Live Long and Prosper," on the back of my arms. I mean, I said I *might*.

I watched so much Star Trek as a kid - all the series, from reruns of the Original Series from the 1960s, through the Next Generation, Deep Space Nine (featuring a Black Captain) and Voyager (featuring a Woman Captain) all during my formative years as a child and teenager.

All of this is to illustrate for you, how Star Trek, maybe more than another other single cultural phenomenon or piece of fiction, shaped me during my formative years as a person. I'm actually pretty convinced that without it, I wouldn't be a Unitarian Universalist.

So, in order for you, my friends, to understand my theology a little more deeply, and to clue those of you in who are not huge Star Trek fans like I am, let me tell you a little about what Star Trek actually was and represents.

You see, Star Trek debut in the 1960s and the amazing and unique thing about it at the time was not that it showed a bunch of people shooting through galaxies 300 years in the future. What was groundbreaking about it was *who* the people on the ship were.

The show featured a Japanese man at the helm, Mr. Sulu, not that long after World War II and America's internment camps for Japanese Americans - in which, George Takei, the actor who played Lieutenant Sulu - was actually interned himself from the age of 5 through 8.

The show featured a Russian (well, at least a man who did a poor impression of a Russian accent) during the Cold War, when tensions with the Russians were high, signifying the belief that we would be peace and co-operations with those across the planet in the future.

And, perhaps most incredibly, the show featured a Black woman, Lieutenant Uhura, as the Communications Officer, at a time when most mainstream roles for Black women were maids depicted them as maids. Nichel Nicholes, the actor who played Lieutenant Uhura, reported that, after the first season she was considering leaving the show and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr himself told her that she could not leave because what she was doing was important for the civil rights movement.

Instead of interpersonal conflicts, the show demonstrated the injustice of racism and sexism and classism using alien species, rather than through difficulties in relationships among humans themselves.

Now, what this represented was the fact that the show's creator, Gene Roddenberry *believed* that such a future was possible. The folks who works on this show dared to *believe* that it was possible a time would come where such things as racism and sexism and classism would disappear. They dared to believe that this was what humanity was capable of.

It was science fiction, not just about Starships and faster than light travel, but about the possibility of eliminating things like racism and white supremacy, poverty, and hunger.

Which is where I think it influenced me to become a Unitarian Universalist. If you take a look at the seven principles of Unitarian Univeresalism, you can see that they are not beliefs, they are visions of world we dare to *believe* is possible. The 6th principle of Unitarian Univeralism states that we affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. Which basically is a description of the earth we see in Star Trek.

So, while the show itself is dated and doesn't seem at all progressive if you look back at it with today's eyes, it was incredibly advanced for its time.

This progressive hopeful message continued in Star Trek, through the other series, but it changed a little. Gene Roddenberry, Star Trek's original creator didn't believe there should be any interpersonal conflict at all on the show, which honestly puts limits to the kind of future it's imagining. And so after his death, Star Trek got a little darker.

But Star Trek wasn't the only thing that got darker. As we have moved away from the 1960s, away from the idealism of the Baby Boomers (remember, we talked about this two weeks ago when we talked about generational theory) through the 1980 and beyond, dystopian science fiction started to become a lot more popular. Dystopian meaning in contrast to the Utopia, the perfect world, that the original Star Trek presented. Dystopia means showing an alternative to our world where we are worse off than we are now.

Of course, dystopian science fiction had already been written before that - see the works of Ray Bradbury like Fahrenheit 451, the novel of the surveillance state Nineteen-Eighty Four, and of course, the original Twilight Zone TV series.

For me, however, reading dystopian fiction provided a stark contrast to the idealism of Star Trek that I'd been fed growing up.

In high school, I was required to read the Handmaids Tale, a Dystopian novel by Canadian author Margaret Atwood that just this past year was made into a TV series on Hulu.

For those of you who are unfamiliar, it's a book about a totalitarian, Biblically based, government, that overthrows the United States government and subjugates women to men, making certain undesirable women "Handmaids" whose role is only to provide children for those wealthier, more powerful families who are infertile due to nuclear war or disaster. It's an incredibly grim book, with not a whole lot of hope in it. I remember very clearly the day in English class where my teacher told us that there was nothing that was depicted in the book that had not happened somewhere in the world, either in present day or in history.

And, in a sense, Atwood wrote the book because she, too, believed that this kind of a future was a possibility for humanity. And then wrote a book about the horrors of such a reality.

And, what you might not know about me is that, next to Star Trek the Handmaids Tale was probably the most influential piece of fiction I have ever consumed. I'm fairly certain I wouldn't be a Unitarian Universalist if it was for the Handmaid's Tale. Because it made me a feminist, and it taught me the danger of taking religious beliefs and scripture literally. It taught me that blind faith needed to be questioned, something we do here at Unitarian Universalist church.

So, this contrast of the Utopian world or Star Trek and the Dystopian world of the Handmaid's Tale - they both influenced me to work towards the world I believed possible, perhaps precisely because I believed the terror of something worse was also true.

Which poses an interesting question that I have been wondering about - when we talk about the state of our world, when we talk about the realities and our visions for the future - is it better to talk of hope, to describe our vision for what we think could come, or should we be prepared for cautionary tales of how it could be?

These two vastly different depictions of a future human society. The best that humanity has to offer, and the worst. Which will we choose?

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This past week, as the reality of the 17 lives lost at a high school in Parkland, Florida, came crashing down on me, I found myself thinking about what kind of future I want for me, and for my children, and for you and your children, and for all the children in the world, because, in the words that were sung by our choir last week by Elizabeth Alexander:

"There are no other people's heartaches  
There are no other people's injuries  
There are no other people's children  
In this world"

I have found that these mass shootings, and if you can believe it there have been three huge ones since I started here six months ago, I have found that they hit at my heart and

my soul and whenever things like this happen it can be hard for me to look for hope. To look at the good of humanity. To look at those who make the laws and wonder what kind of dystopian future, what kind of dystopian reality we are living in today.

Because, I don't know about you, but imagining teachers armed in classrooms with children sounds like the premise of a dystopian novel, doesn't it?

Something different is happening this time, though, after this mass shooting. Due to some convergence of fate, the teenagers in Parkland, Florida are speaking up. And maybe, the rest of us are listening.

Like Emma Gonzalez, the girl who famously "called BS" on the government, the NRA, and other organizations:

She said: "The people in the government who were voted into power are lying to us. And us kids seem to be the only ones who notice and are prepared to call B.S."

And Cameron Kasky, who challenged Senator Marco Rubio from Florida to stop taking money from the NRA on national TV during a Town Hall meeting.

And these kids are doing this while traumatized over what they have seen and experienced. They are not being silent.

Teenagers across the country are organizing walkouts at school, calling for action. Teenagers are actually leading us in the fight for gun control. And it's bringing me hope, in a way that I don't usually feel in times like these.

High School English teacher Jennifer Ansbach tweeted:

"I'm not sure why people are so surprised that the students are rising up—we've been feeding them a steady diet of dystopian literature showing teens leading the charge for years. We have told teen girls they are empowered. What, you thought it was fiction? It was preparation."

And, it's true, even more than when I was growing up. Just look at the Hunger Game series, books about a society where children are forced to fight to the death in support of their districts. It's the teenagers that rise up in that world.

The Hunger Games, of course, show us a dystopian future, one that we would not want to live, see or experience. Well, not unless we were in the wealthy district, District 1. But eventually, it's the rebels who win and overthrow the government. But not without loss and pain.

And, while this book series is supposed to be set in the future, after there has been devastation to the way of life that we know now, I can't help but see the parallels to our world.

One where children are killed at their schools.

One where unarmed people, especially unarmed black men, black teenagers, are killed in the streets and by the police.

One where hunger and homelessness are problems of epidemic proportions. Where a huge percentage of LGBTQ youth are homeless due to being kicked out of their homes.

The Hunger Games might be more obvious and blatant than the world we live in now. But I can't help but ask myself, wouldn't I act the same way if I lived in District One, the wealthy district that manages the games? Wouldn't I let it go on?

You see my own life, and the life of many people I interact with, is comfortable and reasonably secure. And in most dystopias, there is a class of people like me, as well.

So have these children really learned about rebelling against the power of a future society from the world of the Hunger Games?

Or have they just been given the empowerment to rise up in our own once the truth of the dystopian world was revealed to them in the killing of their classmates?

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Two years ago, Stephan Marche, a write for Popular Mechanics, claimed that Star Trek: The Next Generation, was the last hopeful science fiction series about the future. And, as we have seen with all these dystopian worlds of The Handmaid's Tale, The Hunger Games, Black Mirror, and dozens of other series and movies. Heck, even the Harry Potter series, though fantasy, features some aspects of a dark, dystopian world overthrown by teenagers.

And I wonder how it impacts us, not having this positive future to look too. Have our interests become so dark that positive views of the future don't really exist in popular culture anymore? Even the new Star Trek, Star Trek: Discovery, is considerably darker and more dystopian than earlier Star Treks. So where do we find that hope? And more importantly, DO we need to have the positive portrayals of the future, positive portrayals of alternative reality, to balance out the bleak ones?

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On Friday, as I was watching Black Panther for "sermon research" it dawned on me.

We're finding that positive world through superhero movies.

Not just through any superhero movies, but ones that are showing oppressed people with power and technology. Superhero movies like Wonder Woman and Black Panther that put power into the hands of the marginalized.

While Star Trek, the original hopeful future showed all people working together in a Western/American dominated world, we need more than that today. Because we know that simply working together does not get rid of racism and hate. It does not get rid of sexism. It does not end the dystopia that some of us are living in.

No, we need to see worlds and futures and alternate realities where the oppressed are the powerful, where the token characters are white, and the main protagonists are black and the cultural normal are African, not Western. Because we need to imagine a world where that is powerful and that is normalized and that is celebrated.

Star Trek helped us to boldly go for equality, and dystopian fiction helps us to see the world we don't want to become.

We are finally imagining a world where things are different. Where years of oppression are overturned. Where actual equity in society exists again. And it's not just appealing to white people.

We need to remember to have the hopeful vision of the future. We need to keep imagining and reimagining what that future might look like. And we need to keep sharing that hopeful vision of the future with each other.

Because if we can imagine it, we can really see it come to reality. We can really find hope in a world that is sometimes too hard to find hope in.

We Unitarian Universalists are concerned about creating heaven here on earth. So it is part of our faith that calls us to create a better world for ourselves and for our children. So let us imagine together what is possible.

So, friends, I encourage you to consume the media of hope, the stories that help you to see the world you want to bring about. The ones that show the teenagers rising up. The ones that show the people of earth in harmony. The ones that show the oppressed in power. They are the prophetic works of our time.

So let us boldly go into the future and build the world of our dreams. To dare to believe in a future that that is different than today.

Make it so. I mean....

May it be so, and let us say together Amen. Amen.