

Trekkie Todd
Indulging My *Star Trek* Obsession
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
February 24, 2013

Eight years ago, at the start of 2013, I gave a sermon entitled, “My First and Only *Star Trek* Geek Sermon,” asking those who heard it to indulge my obsession “just this once.” As I explained then, as much as I love the iconic television series, and the cultural phenomenon that is still growing in its wake, and even though it addresses many social issues that are perfect for a Sunday message in a Unitarian church, I have long restrained from alluding to *Star Trek* in my sermons.

Even though it is essentially a series of morality plays that boldly explored some of the most challenging issues of its own day in the late 1960s—issues like racism, war, nuclear annihilation, sexism, and freedom from religious tyranny and superstition, I intentionally don’t make a lot of references to in my sermons. This is so even though I love *Star Trek*, in the truest sense of the word. I have deep affections and a sense of nostalgia for its characters and stories. The ringtone on my cellphone is the voice of Lt. Uhura saying, “Enterprise to Captain Kirk. Come in Captain.” I still watch reruns of the show, even though I know each episode by heart, own all the original *Star Trek* films, am addicted to many its television spinoffs, and read lots of *Star Trek* novels while drinking from a few *Star Trek* coffee mugs that my kids have gotten me for Christmas over the years.

My reluctance to draw upon *Star Trek* on Sunday mornings isn’t because I don’t view it a legitimate source of inspiration and reflection. In truth, I consider *Star Trek* a major source of inspiration and instruction in my own journey. As a child, my afterschool babysitter, a nineteen-inch black and white television with a pair of rabbit ears and a rotary dial for switching between about half a dozen stations, was my small window into the world beyond the tiny box I lived in with my dysfunctional family, and *Star Trek* was my escape into a larger universe and with a better future.

Television can be rightly criticized as a massive time-suck. In his book on mind-altering substances, *Food of the Gods*, the late Terence McKenna says, “The nearest analogy to the addictive power of television and the transformation of values that is wrought in the life of the heavy user is probably heroin... Television, while chemically non-invasive, nevertheless is every bit as addicting and physiologically damaging as any other drug¹ . . . In the United States, there are many more televisions than households, the average television set is on six hours a day, and the average person watches more than five hours a day—nearly one-third of their waking time.²

¹ McKenna, Terence, *Food of the Gods*, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1992, p. 218f.

² Ibid.

As a child, I spent hours before my electronic crutch—my gaze transfixed, my face without expression—and let it emancipate me from the troubled reality I called home, and from all the hate, and anger, and fear, and violence, and prejudice I experienced living within the tumult of America's first integrated neighborhoods and schools. By the time I was but five-years-old my innocence had been lost, and I knew the real world was a frightening and dangerous and unfair place.

So television became my refuge, providing me with better visions of the strange new world I was born into. Perhaps it did numb me the difficulties of my own reality, imposed negative cultural values on me, and made me a more compliant citizen and willing consumer. But it also exposed me to values and visions for the world I still maintain and cherish. To this day, I attribute my otherwise inexplicable early childhood wish to become a minister to a character I saw on the 1967 sitcom, *The Flying Nun*, starring Sally Field as lightweight Sister Bertrille at the Convent San Tanco, who would take flight every time a slight gust caught the winged headpiece of her habit. Carlos Ramirez was a character who must have donned a priest's collar in an episode or two, because I thought he was a priest. As a preschooler, I admired how kind and compassionate he was compared to my own father. Ramirez, played by Argentine actor Alejandro Rey gave me an alternate image of manhood and I wanted to grow up to be like him. As it turns out, Ramirez was actually a playboy and casino owner in the show who only wore the collar a time or two to help the Flying Nun out of a fix. Had I understood this at four-years-old, I might have grown up to be behind a bar, or, worse, behind bars.

I also liked watching *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*, a 1969 show starring Bill Bixby as a widowed father whose love for his young son led him to abandon the male stereotypes of the day to help fill his deceased wife's shoes by learning, not only to be a good father, but also a tender mother to his little boy. Bixby showed me what a kind father looks like, and the kind of father I wanted to become. *Bonanza*, the late 1950's show starring Lorne Greene as a widowed rancher, also countered the cowboy stereotype by portraying a wise, caring, and involved father to his three motherless boys. Another 1960's western, *The Big Valley*, starring the powerful Barbara Stanwyck as a widowed Rancher, proved that a woman could also debunk the cultural stereotype by being a great mother, a graceful lady, and as strong and capable as any man when it came to running both a household and a business. Her character, Victoria Barkley was the original woman's libber, and she showed me early on that women are equal to men. If art mimics life, Stanwyck, an orphan raised in foster homes, had become the highest paid woman in America in 1944 while still only in her thirties.

The Brady Bunch is often lampooned as the impossibly perfect family in which the children always get along with each other and dutifully listen to the instructions and advice of their wise and doting parents. But the story is really about two broken and grieving families who manage to come together and, through love and respect, form a perfect family that can get along. This may have been particularly appreciated in a culture with a rising divorce rate, but also because it originally aired between 1969

and 1974, when America itself was torn apart by racism and the Vietnam War. In *The Brady Bunch*, Carol and Mike are equal partners and their three daughters are equal to their three sons. This was a show showing us all what we can accomplish when we set aside our differences, come together, and treat one another as equals, as one family.

But if this idyllic family is still too syrupy for your tastes, you could always turn to *The Partridge Family*, about a single, widowed mother with five kids that never got along. The 1970 show, also with a strong female lead, showed me that it is possible for real families with real problems to care for each other even if they aren't perfect. It showed us that we don't have to be perfect so long as we love each other.

So even though I agree with Terence McKenna, that television is often “a manufactured data stream that can be sanitized to 'protect' or impose cultural values,”³ it has also proven to sometimes be an expression of the counterculture by offering us examples of characters who defy our stereotypes. And for me, this was most true of the original *Star Trek* series than ran for only three seasons, between 1966 and 1969. NBC actually canceled the show after its second season but had little choice but to renew it after receiving over a million fan letters begging them to do so. So, instead of cancelation, still not realizing the goldmine they had, they moved it to 10:00 PM on Friday nights, which was their way of effectively killing it. But just a year later, in 1970, when local stations began syndicating it during afterschool hours, kids like me tuned in and helped turn it into an entertainment phenomenon that now includes nine series, with more on their way, thirteen feature films, countless novels, and fan conventions, and is still expanding after more than 50 years. Even the first NASA Space Shuttle was given then name of *Star Trek's* fictional spaceship, *Enterprise*.

Even so, and as huge a fan as I am, this is only the second time I've chosen to focus on *Star Trek* in a sermon during the past 21 years, and it is largely a repetition of what I said the first time. This is mostly because a *Star Trek* sermon seems like a Unitarian Universalist cliché. A lot of UU minister struggle to find depth in their sermons and tend to use superficial metaphors. But ours is an old religion with lots of philosophical and theological depth that should be delved into on Sunday mornings, so I don't like cheapening it with clichés and superficial metaphors. Just Google “Star Trek” and “Unitarian” sometime and see for yourself how many Unitarian Universalist sermons, articles, and clubs there are that do make reference to it.

As anyone who has listened to me often enough will know, my sermons are hardly cliché or superficial. At heart, I'm still a rebellious teenager and don't like saying what is expected of me anymore than I like *doing* what is expected of me. I also like to think deeply about things, given my background in philosophy and psychology, and I have better material to draw upon than the rather simplistic morality plays of

³ Ibid.

Star Trek that you can easily understand by watching the show for yourself. Finally, basing sermons on *Star Trek*, rather than the depth of our own liberal religious tradition, is precisely what critics of our faith often ridicule UU ministers for. So even though I love the show and find it to be a great source of personal inspiration and entertainment, I seldom reference it to make a point.

But, in fairness, *Star Trek*, is such a tremendous part of American culture and, increasingly, of our global culture, it deserves some in depth discussion in our Unitarian pulpits now and again. Just in case there's a small chance you know little about *Star Trek*, it's a show about the 23rd century starship *Enterprise* and her crew trekking through the Universe in order to reach out and explore strange new worlds. Its main characters are the cowboyesque Captain Kirk, his science officer Mr. Spock, an alien with pointed ears, raised eyebrows, and no emotions, and Dr. McCoy, a futuristic version of a plainspoken country doctor with a terrible bedside manner. But in 1966, when it first aired, during the Vietnam era, the cold war, and the Civil Rights struggle, it also included a prominent Asian, a Russian, and a black cast member—Mr. Sulu, Mr. Chekov, and Lt. Uhura, among other regulars on the show.

In the documentary, *Trek Nation*, about the show's creator, Gene Rodenberry, for example, the black cast member, actress Nichelle Nichols, who played Lt. Uhura, tells the following story:

I told Gene after the first season that I would not be returning to the show, that I wanted to return to my first love, which is musical theatre. But I didn't know that meeting a *Star Trek* fan would change my life. I was told that a fan wanted to meet me, and when I turned and looked into the face of Dr. Martin Luther King, I was breathless. And he said, 'Yes, I'm a Trekker, I'm a *Star Trek* fan.' And he told me that *Star Trek* was one of the only shows that his wife Coretta and he would allow their little children to stay up and watch. And I thanked him and I told him that I was leaving the show. All the smile came off his face and he said, 'You can't do that.' He said, 'Don't you understand that for the first time we're seen as we should be seen. You don't have a black role. You have an equal role.' And when I went back to work Monday morning, I went to Gene's office and I told him what had happened over the weekend, and he said, 'Welcome home.'

Naturally, I was incredibly moved upon hearing this story, this history, and realized just how bold *Star Trek* really was in confronting the prejudices of its day. As Gene Rodenberry himself said, "I was pleased that in those days, when you couldn't even get Blacks on television, that I not only had a Black, but a Black woman and a Black officer. I thought, 'that'll show 'em.'" As you can imagine, not everyone was happy about this back then. The person responsible for dealing with all the fan mail recounts, "We got one marvelous letter from a woman who pointed out that she was not at all prejudiced, and she really believed in equality and all of this, and since we had a Russian, which she sort of agreed with, and a Scotsman and an Oriental, there really was no need to have Nichelle Nichols... and we sent her an autographed

picture of Nichelle and our thanks.”⁴ Additionally, some TV stations in the South refused to air *Star Trek*, even when it was still on Network television, because of its racially mixed cast.

But Rodenberry didn’t care one iota! He truly did take television where no one had gone before, and regularly took on the subject of racism and prejudice. In one episode, a kiss between Lt. Uhura and Captain Kirk made history as the first interracial kiss ever on TV. In another episode, two alien men, completely black on one half of their bodies and completely white on the other, are the last two members of their species. The rest have killed each other off due to extreme says he prejudice. When Captain Kirk can’t understand what difference they see in each other, they explain how obvious it should be: their black and white colors are on opposite sides. In yet another episode, when it is revealed that Mr. Spock, a Vulcan, looks like a Romulan, one of Starfleet’s most dreaded enemies, a crewman makes an offhanded remark suggesting Spock might be a spy. “I didn’t quite get that Mr. Stiles,” Captain Kirk says.

“Nothing,” the crewman responds.

“Repeat it,” Kirk commands.

“I was suggesting that Mr. Spock could probably translate [the Romulan message] for you sir.”

“I’m assuming you’re complimenting Mr. Spock on his ability to decode.” Kirk asks.

“I’m not sure Sir.”

Kirk then gets in the crewman’s face. “Well here’s one thing you can be sure of Mister, leave any bigotry in your quarters! There’s no room for it on the bridge. Do I make myself clear?”

And all of us kids watching and wanting to be just like Captain Kirk were clear too. There was no room in the universe for bigotry. (Spock, by the way, was intentionally made up to look like the Devil, and was originally conceived of with red skin. This didn’t happen because of makeup issues.)

One of the other frequent moral dilemmas on *Star Trek* regards the use of violence and war to resolve conflict. In an episode involving the dreaded Klingon Empire—a warlike race that was, no doubt, a caricature of the Russians, complete with bushy eyebrows, a sash around their uniforms, and flared pants—a superior race of pacifists prevents them from fighting, otherwise both sides would have completely annihilated each other, touching upon the very real threat of a nuclear holocaust. “[Afterward] ...all of the Klingon episodes,” according to scriptwriter David Gerrold, “were, in one way or another, restatements of the original: Klingons and Earthmen must *not* fight,”⁵ a.k.a., Russians and Americans must not fight either.

⁴ Gerrold, David, *The World of Star Trek*, Bluejay Books, Inc., New York, NY, 1973, 1984, p. 102.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Star Trek is certainly known for all its alien women dressed in scant outfits, as well as for Captain Kirk's many romantic escapades, and can be fairly criticized for being somewhat sexist, especially by today's standards. But it is also fair to acknowledge the show for helping us to achieve today's standards, at least at times, by portraying women as equals. One episode begins for example, with an attractive female crewmember rubbing Kirk's back while in his Captain's chair. He mistook her for Spock and was embarrassed by the encounter. Later in the same episode, they're on a planet that makes whatever they're thinking about come true. She thinks of a princess costume and is soon dressed up like a princess. But a few minutes later, when the Black Knight she conjures up kills Dr. McCoy with a lance, she begins screaming and crying uncontrollably, just as TV and film often stereotyped women in those days. Captain Kirk takes her shoulders and sternly says, "We're in trouble. I need every crewman alert and thinking." She instantly stops, regains her composure, and says, "Aye aye Sir." Keep in mind, on *Star Trek*, everyone is called Mister, even females. In the final episode of the original series, Captain Kirk's body is inhabited and taken over by a woman who has been overlooked for promotion simply because of her gender, and William Shatner does an outstanding job of actually playing a female character.

The final value I gained from watching *Star Trek* that I will mention here, regards our need as humans to abandon superstition and primitive beliefs if we are ever going to evolve. This was a common theme, but the one episode I'll mention was about the Greek god Adonai who captures the Enterprise and its crew demanding that they worship him. It turns out the Greek gods were an alien race with almost omnipotent powers. They'd left Earth when humans stopped revering them, but Adonai wants to return to the glory days. After Kirk and his crew manage to destroy the god's power source, Adonai weeps, "I would have cherished you, cared for you, I would have loved you as a father loves his children. Did I ask so much?" To which Kirk replies, "We've outgrown you. You asked for something we can no longer give." That's what makes *Star Trek* so unique. It doesn't fall into pointless debate over the question of God's existence. It simply says, "It doesn't matter." God or no God, humans need to take responsibility for ourselves and for improving our world and for creating a better future.

So these are the values I learned from *Star Trek* so long ago in my life, and that have stayed with me and shaped me ever since. There's no room for bigotry. We must not fight or make war. Men and women are equals. And humans don't need God to be good or to improve their lives. We must take responsibility for ourselves. And though I may seldom, if ever, mention this iconic show by name, these are the themes of my own continuing mission and that are present with me every Sunday, in every sermon, and every day of my life. So, as cliché as it may sound, let me conclude by saying, Live long and prosper.