

THE RODDENBERRY REDUCTION

A reflection on leadership, the challenges
we face, and adopting a journey to 'better'

by
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Imagine childhood in small town Nova Scotia... circa 1970. The movie *Pleasantville* most accurately depicts that kind of gentle pace and bucolic charm. Dave Keon and Bobby Orr were our heroes. We knew the words to every Stompin' Tom Connors song. Apple sauce, steamed clams, and molasses on toast powered the endless street hockey games out front, interrupted only by school and fossil hunting expeditions in the slate quarries which surrounded our village. In a word: perfect.

Television was limited. *Hockey Night in Canada* was religion, and for us meant staying up late on a Saturday night. Cartoons on Saturday morning, *Don Messer's Jubilee* on Sunday (maybe Anne Murray might sing tonight?), and an array of formulaic situation comedies rounded out two-channel viewing. Other than the urgency which accompanied a Leafs game, our television life was boring – until I saw the first *Star Trek* rerun which exploded into our lives on Channel 3.

It was a life changer.

From that first episode more than 50 years ago, to anxiously waiting for the next *Star Trek Discovery* episode (on tonight at 5pm!), I have remained a fan and have become a devotee to many universal ideals Gene Roddenberry promoted via the universe he created.

For a then-seven-year-old viewer, the excitement was based on action, space-age technology, an unbelievably cool cast, and the contrast the show provided to my insular childhood. As I grew, and followed spinoff series and movies, the deeper messages intended by Roddenberry seeped in. The lessons delivered by each episode brought me to the place where I believe *Star Trek*, in every iteration, is as important a collection of art – and a clarion call for a shared awareness – as any cluster of works in our species' history. Too bravely stated? Perhaps I can convince...

The United Federation of Planets is a concept predicated on an aspirational vision. A coalition of

intergalactic species work together, within coda which includes a don't-meddle-unless-we-have-to Prime Directive. Preserve life. Share acquired understandings. Engage in the laudable quest to learn, survive, and thrive *without* subjugating other living things. No citizen or species suffers want. All of the basic needs to enable survival and provide the conditions for thriving are rights, not privileges reserved for an elite few. Food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education, entertainment, participatory governance, leisure, universal access to technology, and the maintenance of a healthy and balanced ecology are accepted and protected guarantees. Life, *all life*, is precious.

Now, it wouldn't be riveting viewing for a seven-year-old – or most sixty-year-olds – if everything was perpetually peaceful. Even in Roddenberry's quadrant, there must be common and uniting threats to strengthen resolve in a Federation's quest to achieve and preserve Utopia. These threats come in the form of invading species, artificial intelligence running amok, and cataclysmic natural phenomena. The ageless conundrum borne by leaders in crisis plays out week after week. Do we risk the crew to save the 'one'? Do we abandon the 'one', and fly away to preserve 'the many'? As a leader in parts of my life, those terrifying decisions made by James T. Kirk and later protégées resonate deeply. Sacrifice by each, for each, ennobles the many. I hope in my service life I have been more like Kirk and Janeway than not.

The Federation's common good can only be sought by a completely diverse collective of equal members. Species, race, gender, religion, and all variations of 'being' are included without question. The fact that the whole is made more by its many parts is tacit. The irrefutable logic which requires full inclusion to realize absolute potential is clear. Survival depends on it. Thriving is defined by it.

One of the challenges Roddenberry's crew took on early in the original series was artificial intelligence. A.I. gone rogue, and the concept that artificial intelligence can evolve and become 'sentient', and be included

in the Federation as an equal life form, were major themes. Gilbert Ryle's "ghost in the machine" treatise has been reformed many times and has become a primary concern of philosophers and governors of modern life. This concern was forecast by many in Roddenberry's era and has featured prominently, and ominously, in books and films like: *I, Robot*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *Ex Machina*.

Isaac Asimov provided a simple logical framework to govern the creation of artificial life. The assimilation of these laws is critical to understanding the challenge Roddenberry plumbed, and future series writers brought to life, many times throughout our ongoing *Star Trek* age. We even met a formidable human/machine hybrid who adopted an uncompromising honey-bee-like hive mind and collective. The 'one as integral part of species' and 'species as one' ethic was chillingly brought to life as The Borg assimilated all 'useful' species as part of an ever-expanding hive universe. The phrase "resistance is futile" is one of the most powerful ever uttered in television history. Are The Borg just a terrifyingly effective protagonist meant to be a part of a simple 'us vs. them' shoot 'em up? Or was something more intended by the writers?

Asimov's Laws, formulated in 1942, are as follows:

FIRST LAW:

A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.

SECOND LAW:

A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the first Law.

THIRD LAW:

A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the first two Laws.

In *Star Trek*, and most of these stories, humans and humanoids unwittingly infuse too much capacity in machines, and these often-anthropomorphic machines rise up. In most stories, the afflicted creators regain control, often by employing logic-impeding randomness and intuition, and order is restored. The lesson delivered by Asimov is clear. DO NOT create something which may outgrow and consume the creator. The successful adherence to his Laws implies sentient creators are all wise in their care to avoid creating a potential we may not be able to control. As a metaphor for all technology since the Industrial Revolution, we have been pushing ourselves to the edge of extinction to control 'dumb' inventions already. Will we learn Asimov's lesson before we are tested by something even more threatening than global warming?

Wouldn't it be interesting if humans adopted Asimov's code as a simple constitution for humankind? Try replacing the noun 'robot' with 'human' and reread the Laws. Compelling.

The most important Roddenberry-wrapped philosophical gift is one our species must adopt — and adopt quickly. We must ensure that every human is guaranteed all of the fulsome conditions for survival, and be provided the means to secure the potential to thrive, enshrined in our own 'Federation Law'. No sins of omission. No lack of any requirement expected for every member. All cultures and all ecosystems are restored and balanced. Technology is employed to achieve this balance, rather than ensure less-than-fair and out-of-balance shares for too few.

Citizens compete for responsibility, not resources.

The Captain eats no better than any crew member. The Admiral sleeps no less securely than a farmer. Remove the pursuit of 'stuff'. Infuse the pursuit of knowledge and compete for the right to exercise it for the greater good. This is the only way forward.

I hope Gene Roddenberry will forgive this adaptation of his iconic opener:

***"OUR FULL
COMMITMENT TO
EACH OTHER, AND
COMPASSION FOR
ALL LIVING THINGS, IS
OUR NEXT FRONTIER.
THIS IS THE MISSION
OF OUR VOYAGE ON
STARSHIP EARTH. TO
EXPLORE UNITING
OUR SPECIES. TO
PRESERVE ALL
LIFE. TO BOLDLY GO
WHERE WE HAVE
NOT GONE BEFORE...
TOGETHER."***