

Final voyage to new frontier

It is early morning and I have just read in the newspaper that Gene Roddenberry has died. I am moved to write something about him.

This man, creator of "Star Trek," only briefly touched my life, but he touched it with an immediacy I will not forget. I was in Los Angeles, giving a slide show/lecture to the Explorers Club. It was during the fall of 1988. The subject of my slide show was, among other things, my dive into Devil's Hole, a deep, flooded earthquake fault in Death Valley.

After my presentation, Gene Roddenberry came up to me and we talked a bit, I don't exactly remember what about. He was an enthusiastic man, I remember that. He thanked me for the show and handed me his business card.

The next day I went back down to Los Angeles (I did a lot of driving between Santa Barbara and Los Angeles that week), to see an old friend who was dying in a hospital in Sherman Oaks. This friend was in fact the photographer who had worked with me in Devil's Hole. He was not supposed to live more than a week.

The whole thing was a senseless tragedy we were all having a hard time accepting. It was hard to know what to say to him because anything of comfort seemed so glib. In the hospital, I basically sat there quietly and held his hand.

When I got home from that trip, early in the evening, I walked into the house, emotionally drained. My husband, Jim, was watching a "Star Trek: The Next Generation" episode on television, and without a lot of talk I sat down on the couch next to him and stared blankly at the television.

Suddenly I tuned into what was happening on the screen: Captain Picard was facing the death of his entire crew, and he and one of his crew members were discussing it.

Data: "I have a question sir. What is death?"

Picard: "You've picked probably the most difficult of all questions, Data. Some explain it as our changing into an indestructible form . . . forever unchanging. They argue that the purpose of the entire universe is to then maintain us in an Earth-like garden which will give us pleasure through all eternity. At the other extreme are those who prefer the idea of our blinking into nothingness with all our experiences, hopes and dreams only a delusion."

Data: "Which do you believe?"

Picard: "Considering the marvelous complexity of our universe, its clockwork

perfection, its balances of this against that . . . matter, energy, gravitation, time, dimension, pattern, I believe our existence must mean more than either of these choices. I prefer to believe that what we are goes beyond Euclidian and other 'practical' measuring systems . . . and that, in ways we cannot yet fathom, our existence is part of a reality *beyond* what we understand now as reality."

The hair stood up on the back of my neck. "What'd they say?" I asked Jim, who said, understandably, something like, "Are you kidding?"

The next day I called Gene Roddenberry at his office. I asked him about the episode I'd just seen. He said it was one of his favorites. I asked him for the pages of the script that contained the dialogue on death. He said he would send them to me immediately.

With this dialogue in hand, I sat down to write my friend in the hospital a letter. I wanted to wish him Godspeed, but also to share with him some thoughts like Picard did with Data.

I wrote to my friend that I believed he would discover a whole new dimension to life, one far more expansive than he now knew — a dimension so subtle as to be entirely overlooked during his earth experience.

I wrote him of these and other things, and then I typed in the Picard-Data dialogue from the "Star Trek" episode that had gotten me thinking about all this.

I was greatly consoled when I was told that my letter had comforted my friend a great deal.

And now, as I look at this picture of Gene Roddenberry in the newspaper, I remember how he freed my abilities to communicate with my friend about this difficult subject. And I think of his own voyage, too. As Picard had said, his existence is now part of a reality beyond what we on Earth understand as reality. Godspeed, Gene Roddenberry.

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