

In the galaxy of religion, resistance is not futile



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

In the sci-fi series "Star Trek: The Next Generation," one of the most dangerous aliens is the Borg – a species that travels in huge black cubes, "assimilating" all other species they encounter. The Borg captures anyone in their path and turns each organism into a half-organic/half-mechanized hybrid. With humans this means a person is transformed into a machine, part by part. Frightening, horrible. "You will be assimilated" is the most fearsome thing the crew of the Enterprise hears as they cross the galaxy.

In their persistent quest to stop the Borg, the starship crew tries everything. Finding they can't outrun the Borg or hide from them, they hit the big powerful cubes with massive firepower, but nothing works; there seems no way to avoid being absorbed into the predator network. The Borg is a "collective" – like a mammoth bee hive – that operates as one, each part working in sync with the other. Unless a species chooses to join the collective (and no one would), the voice from the Borg booms out: "Resistance is futile." And for most species in space, it is.

So how does the Enterprise finally stop the Borg? They find a way to separate one of the "bees" from the "hive" and show him, through human kindness and friendship, that he is an "individual" with a mind of his own. He discovers he can think for himself and freely choose whether to go back to being a "drone" or a self-

determining person. I won't spoil the whole story, but the moment "Hugh" says "I think" rather than "We think," everything changes, for him, and for the Borg.

See any connection to religious faith here? Not only religion, of course, but any "hive," any group or party that seeks to incorporate individuals into a collective. To operate efficiently, the machine requires obedient members who cooperate as a single unit. The machine won't function if too many decide they don't want to be cogs any longer. "I think" can be the greatest threat to the corporate machines.

For a great many people in history, resisting the collective has been futile. They feel powerless to disconnect from the overpowering control of the Great Cubes. When people are led to believe the Cube is invincible, that assimilation is inevitable, they give up their power with their individuality.

On the other hand, we might find a positive element to the cube collective. A bee hive can be a highly efficient community working together for the benefit of all. If every individual unit is able to follow their instinct for preservation and production (honey), the hive thrives. Of course, bees aren't evangelizing other bees or other species – they go about their business and don't bother anyone who doesn't bother them.

Yet, we're not bees (or ants, or a herd). If we become drones living only to serve the Queen (the Almighty Authority), some good can certainly come from that – a well-ordered society ... and honey! Yet, how many drones know they are drones? And, is the Queen (the ultimate leader, perhaps a deity) benevolent, or is it malevolent and abusive?

To resist means to stand and withstand. Resistance is not futile, though sometimes it seems that way. An individual, or a coalition, pushes back on the power of

the impersonal Cube and they meet resistance from the Cube. In order not to be forced into a collective where we lose our precious individuality we have to stand and insist on resistance.

The crew of the Enterprise discovered a weakness in the Great Machine that threatened their freedom. The search for the underbelly of the Borg presented a response, a clear way to resist. The word "futile" comes from a word for "leaky" – literally, something can't hold water, it's useless, pointless. In matters of belief, futility means giving up the will to resist, giving in to a "greater power." If that greatness can be found in a creative and constructive collective, where each is valued, that's not futile. Who would resist that?

Though we have a right to resistance, we don't need to resist positive change. The National Park Service is faced with some difficult decisions about which lands to protect. In new guidelines, park managers are being asked "to think beyond resistance to change and begin considering transformation" (The New York Times, "What to Save?," May 18, 2021). Priorities may need to be re-ordered to take a stand to benefit all.

Concerning the religious enterprise, people of faith can stand alongside secular people to transform our world for good, insisting on individual autonomy and resisting Cube-thinking. We need many voices among the crew, in a circle not a cube, where a galaxy of perspectives are assimilated.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are "Friendly Freethinker," "Broken Bridges" and "A Freethinker's Gospel." Learn more at chighland.com.