

When favorite places are in outer spaces



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

I was raised in space. Well, it seemed that way. Growing up just north of Seattle, my sister and I were privileged to enjoy yards and neighborhoods to play in,

trees to climb, parks and seashores for fresh air fun. My first home offered fruit trees with the best plums and cherries I've ever had. Then we moved to a "mansion," a four-story house surrounded by tall evergreen trees with a big vegetable garden in back. Before development, the final family home was bordered by empty lots, home to rabbits, pheasants and bucketloads of blackberries. Open areas invited expanding imagination for any inquisitive child's mind.

In a way, I sense I was also raised in a more expansive space. Flickering fantasy worlds on the television enchanted me with shows like "Lost in Space" and "Star Trek." Even as my parents purchased a small cabin in the Cascade mountains near a crystal clear river, I was drawn to increasing landscapes and skyscapes where my insatiable curiosity beckoned further exploration into the wild unknowns, here, up there, out there. I began to learn that wild

places are also outer spaces. I became a student of nature that included forests as well as planets and stars. Even when the mystery of UFOs captured my attention and I read every book I could find on "encounters" and "visits" from "aliens," I think the most lasting Big Story was the space exploration of the Enterprise and the ships that followed. It may very well be true that the journeys of those crews

See SPACES, Page 2C

Spaces

Continued from Page 1C

shaped my own faith journey more than just about any other mythic transport for meaning.

Over the course of years as well as centuries, the "Star Trek" universe has spanned galaxies, quadrants and even time itself, from the original and beyond. From "The Next Generation" to "Deep Space Nine," from "Voyager" to "Enterprise," from "Discovery" and "Picard" to "Strange New Worlds." If you're a fan of science fiction fantasy, one or more of these series and seasons potentially presents ethical/moral/spiritual guidance unknown to historical religious teachings. I would go so far to argue the overall "Star Trek" story contains all the seeds necessary to grow a religion or ethical way of life for our time and far into the future.

The elements we can identify focus

on inclusion, diversity, the quest for knowledge, exploration and discovery themselves. Though starship captains have mostly been white men, strong women have also guided the adventures, including Captain Janeway (Voyager) and Captain Burnham (Discovery), the first Black woman to sit in that chair (Benjamin Sisko was the first Black man to command a vessel, though his was the space station, Deep Space Nine). To some extent, "Star Trek" has always reflected the culture and the time. From early sexist days (female crew members in mini-skirts) the series has evolved to include LGBTQ personnel and a spectrum of ethnicities. This reflects Trek creator Gene Roddenberry's vision of full inclusion not only of human diversity but an interstellar variety of species brought into the United Federation of Planets. Though most crews are led by humans, there has been an increasing number of "alien" species guiding the way. We've come a long way from simply having Spock the Vulcan as

science officer.

One clear theme we can trace through the whole "Star Trek" universe, one that has philosophical/spiritual meaning related to an earthly or planetary pilgrimage. It centers on the interrelationship of humans and artificial intelligence – our present and future organic connection to machines, computers, androids, starships themselves. The main issue is personhood.

How will humanity relate to and work with, even form bonds of friendship, with non-human beings? Are they "beings" at all? Do they have minds, souls, hearts, dreams?

These mysteries link to other important dilemmas presented by a host of alien species (reminding us humans are aliens too!). Probably the best gift of "Star Trek" is the plethora of questions raised by the writers. They challenge us to think beyond ourselves, beyond our human hubris, to probe into the essence of who we are. That will only be discovered as we question ourselves, our place

in the universe, our place among other lifeforms, terrestrial and extraterrestrial.

Some of my favorite places are in outer spaces. "To go where no one has gone before" is a secular, even a sacred, call to explore, to discover, to expand spheres of inclusion, powered by reason, scientific curiosity and basic human wonder. And perhaps it's not only human wonder? Since the "outer spaces" can be as close as our backyards or even our own mysterious bodies, the explorations don't require starships, only a sense of the wildness within, the universe – if you will – in our own imaginative minds.

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.