

**Bound for a Place Called Earth:
Science Fiction Myths for our Culture,
from Star Trek to (the New) Battlestar Gallactica**

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These are the days that have been given to us...
~ William R. Murry

Star Wars music – first movie I saw multiple times. My wife said her first date, chaperoned, in the seventh grade, was to see The Enterprise Strikes Back. With our culture stratifying, it's unlikely that any single movie or series will have the same effect.

I begin with the words of Joseph Campbell:

“A myth is a public dream; a dream is a private myth.”

Whoever you are, whatever your relationship with popular science fiction – obsession or disdain or something in-between – I invite you to take a fresh look at sci-fi cinema as the screen onto which the dreams of our public unconscious are projected. Just as our private dreams may reveal the conflicts, passages, and stories of our lives, so may our public dreams reveal these aspects of our society.

Consider Star Trek not just as the creation of Gene Rodenberry and actors like William Shatner, but also as the mythic creation of a culture trying to understand itself. During the three-year run of Star Trek from 1966 to 1969, Martin Luther King was assassinated and

race riots ensued. The Voting Rights Act became law one year before the show began. And there, on the screen, we see a future vision of a multi-ethnic crew; we see a conflict between a half-black, half-white faced man and his mirror image, a half-white, half-black-faced man; and we see the first television on-screen kiss between an African American woman, Lieutenant Uhura, and a white man: Captain Kirk of course, who had romances with all good-looking women he happened across during his altruistic mission to boldly go where no man had gone before.

A progressive show in many ways, Star Trek also reflected our society's fears and prejudices. The bad guys were bad guys, no question. The dark-skinned Klingons are understood to represent the Soviets; the Asian-looking Romulans represent the Chinese. They may be contained but never trusted. Other villains include computers, which are repeatedly outwitted by Kirk's brilliant use of illogical statements, a skill he practices for kicks on his computer-like friend, Mr. Spock.

In the late 1960s, mainstream America dreamed of racial harmony – yet our dreams still had three white men on center stage: Kirk, Spock, and McCoy. (Later editions of Star Trek featured a black man and a white woman in command.) Our adversaries we saw as close-to-human, but still evil; empires similar to ours, but not quite as strong or smart and certainly not as kind. As Neil Armstrong took mankind's first step on to the moon, we were unreservedly optimistic about our quest to “boldly go where no man had gone before.” We were beginning to worry about the power of technology, about it

getting a life of its own – yet we still believed or wanted to believe that human ingenuity could reign it in, that Kirk could outwit the computer, and we told ourselves this, again and again.

In the late 70s and 80s, our public dreams took the form of Star Wars. With our withdrawal from Vietnam, we stopped worrying about the Romulans; just the Klingons remained, the Soviets, one Evil Empire with which to contend. We feared its ability not to destroy a battleship here or there, but to destroy entire civilizations with its great weapon, the Death Star – the bomb. We created a myth in which our hero destroyed the Death Star with a single shot, mimicking the destructive power of the atomic bomb. The Star Wars trilogy climaxes with the destruction of the Death Star and its inhabitants in the sky, exploding like fireworks, the good guys cheering.

If you doubt the power of myth to shape reality, or the power of science-fiction as myth, consider that the leader of one of earth's real-life superpowers referred to the other superpower as "The Evil Empire," a clear reference to Star Wars.

Since the mid-1980s, our sci-fi myths have become darker, and more complicated. We are less sure who is good, who is evil; even the boundaries of humanity are questioned, as are assumptions about its inherent goodness.

As the cold war came to a close, the Klingons and Romulans faded to the background. The new Star Trek shows, beginning with The Next Generation, still occasionally featured the old enemies, but a half-Klingon had become a valuable member of the crew. Science

fiction increasingly portrayed enemies of our own creation: the androids of Blade Runner, the Cylons of Battlestar Gallactica. In our waking lives we worried less about The Evil Empire and more about the dangers of nuclear technology generally, as the meltdown in Chernobyl killed tens of thousands of people, and America did not cheer. We began to see the bete noire of our nightmares less as Other and more as Us.

Science fiction shows and movies, such as the short-lived TV series Firefly and the _____ movie spawned by the series, became more morally ambivalent, characters, motives and plots in shades of grey...

The Cylons of the 1978 Battlestar Gallactica were created by lizard-men also known as Cylons. As in many Star Trek episodes, trouble begins when a long cold war is broken by the other party's attack, in violation of an armistice. The new Battlestar Gallectica – and forgive me if I drop the qualifier “new” from now on – this version made an important change to the story: the Cylons were created by humans. They rebelled, fled, grew in strength, and attacked – massively attacked -- no warning, no demands. **JUST AS TERRORISTS IN THE REAL WORLD BEGAN ATTACKING, NOT TO TAKE HOSTAGES, BUT TO KILL MANY, INCLUDING THEMSELVES.**

The first episode aired early in 2002, just months after 9/11. While few Americans dared to state that al-Queda was in part the creation of U.S. foreign policy in the Mideast, the sci-fi public myth was saying: the enemy is of our own creation. As politicians overtly

denied or simply ignored the growing menace to human society from global warming, the myth was saying: the enemy is of our own creation, and it doesn't negotiate or give warning.

The following quote is taken from Commander Adama's speech in the pilot episode:

We decided to play God, create Life. When that life turned against us, we comforted ourselves with the knowledge that it wasn't our fault, not really. You cannot play God and wash your hands of the things you created. Sooner or later the day comes when you can't hide from the things you've done anymore.

The new sci-fi myth differs in another essential way as well, reflecting changes in the thinking of our society. The Star Wars trilogy ends with the dramatic destruction of the Death Star of the Empire, humans and ewoks cheering. *Battlestar Gallactica begins* with destruction: in the form of mushroom clouds. The Cylons don't just zap the humans to a sanitized form of destruction; they *nuke* the humans, repeatedly – the few survivors on the planet Caprica have to take anti-radiation pills every day. This is how the show *begins*.

Recently I preached a sermon based on the book *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*, by my seminary president, Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker. She calls for a new religious frame for our times, inviting us to see ourselves as living not before an apocalypse, but after one. After several, actually: 9/11, Rwanda, Vietnam, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Gulag, Auchwitz, Guatamala, Bosnia. And now, Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Congo. She says that even liberal religion is

apocalyptic in its thinking, oriented toward a perfect age that we must help usher in, a “Glorious, Golden City,” the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community.

The conceptual shift Parker seeks in religion has been underway in science fiction, in our popular-culture myths. In *Battlestar Galactica*, the 49,000 survivors of the Cylon attack are called to salvage what they can, and survive. In the pilot episode, the Secretary of Education, Laura Roslin, finds that she has become President of the Federation – because the President, Vice-President, and the other forty-one higher ranking government officials have been killed in the Cylon attack. Roslin happens to be returning from the decommissioning of the old space battleship, *Battlestar Galactica*. The *Galactica* survives because it has no networked computers, so it is not disabled with the rest of the fleet in the attack.

Roslin is sworn in as President and rises to the occasion, persuading the military commander, Adama, to give up his attack on the Cylons, gather as many survivors as possible, and flee. In *Star Trek*, as U.S. astronauts landed on the moon, our mission was to explore, to boldly go where no person had gone before. In *Star Wars*, our mission was to destroy the Evil Empire. In *Battlestar Galactica*, the sci-fi myth of the early 21st century, the mission is survival, in hopes of finding our way to Earth. Our enemy is the servant technology that has taken on a life of its own, with unforeseen and destructive consequences.

What does it mean to live in such times, and to lead? In the aftermath of destruction, how can we find hope, courage, and

strength? In *Battlestar Galactica*, I see two models for how we can live and lead in such times – there may be more, but I am not yet done with the second season on DVD! The first is a traditional religious strength, exemplified in President Roslin, and the second is an atheistic, existentialist strength, exemplified by Commander Adama. Each character has many of the other’s qualities, and they influence one another.

Battlestar Galactica takes surprising turns in its uses of religion, far more than I can describe in this sermon. While *Star Wars* dealt with “The Force,” learned from a martial-arts sensei, spiritual strength in *Battlestar Galactica* comes from scripture, more like the Bible. President Roslin, a liberal, educated teacher, grows in strength as she listens to a priestess quoting scripture of an Exodus-like event to convince Roslin that she is the prophesied leader to take humanity to Earth. Roslin is extremely practical and resourceful, quickly judges character, weighs options, and makes necessary sacrifices, keeping the larger mission always in mind. She works with what she has available to her, spending no energy wishing for anything else. She is this-worldly, not a spiritualist, yet she learns to draw strength from scripture, from sacred stories.

Roslin’s character could have been written by Rebecca Parker. I’ll share now the same passage from Parker I read to you in March:

In the aftermath of Apocalypse, the religious enterprise can be imagined as a kind of salvage work, recognizing the resources that sustain and restore life –

resources that are ready at hand, not in some distant promised land. After the Apocalypse, we accept our dependence on sources of life greater than ourselves and open our hearts to receive survival knowledge from those who have already found restoration. We know ourselves to be living in a time of breakdown and breakthrough, chaos and creativity, fragmentation and resourcefulness, pain and grace. Our tasks include tending to injury in ourselves and others, collecting resources buried in the rubble, and constructing shelters for body and spirit, family and community.

Roslin is a strong, practical, salvaging leader who comes to accept her dependence on sources of life greater than herself and opens her heart to receive “survival knowledge from those who have already found restoration” – in the scriptures.

Commander Adama, like Roslin, is resourceful and decisive. I have not yet see him experience what might be called a spiritual awakening, though he strives continually to be awake. He respects religious traditions, seeing their value for other individuals and for society, but he is atheistic himself. He models not only religious tolerance but religious appreciation.

In one episode, Roslin appears to be on the brink of death, from cancer. Adama makes an announcement over the P.A. system to his ship; or perhaps it is to the entire rag-tag fleet. He says – I’m quoting from memory – “President Roslin is very ill from cancer. If it is your

custom to pray, I ask you to pray, because she needs it. Or you can join me in keeping her in your thoughts.” If President Laura Roslin is Rebecca Parker, the Christian UU, Adama is the Humanist UU minister: in fact that one scene represents the distinct nature of UU ministry remarkably well, an atheist inviting people to pray, or meditate, as best suits each person!

Adama is a battle-hardened realist. An observant and practical leader, he knows the value of hope, at least for others. So he assures the fleet that he knows how to find Earth, even though he believes in it the way you and I believe in the Garden of Eden: a powerful myth.

At a few key moments, he asks questions that might seem despairing from another character. In his de-commissioning speech he says, “We are the flawed Creation” and says the people need to ask themselves “why we as a people are worth saving.”

Adama seems to me an existentialist. By Sartre’s definition, that means he believes existence precedes essence. In other words, there’s no such thing as human nature: we are not inherently good, we are not inherently evil, we are exactly what our actions show us to be. We are the flawed Creation not because we are inherently flawed, but because we’ve made serious mistakes. We have to take responsibility for our actions, including our creation of beings who want to destroy us, our making our part of the universe less habitable to us.

Adama finds meaning not in scripture, not by seeing himself in an ancient story, not by accepting his dependence on sources of life greater than himself, not by hoping for a better world: his occasional talk of Earth is only for others. Adama finds meaning by answering

the question “Are we worth saving?” moment to moment, in how he lives. While less explicit with Roslin, she exhibits this sort of strength as well.

In one particularly dramatic episode, Adama makes plans to assassinate another leader who somehow also survived the Cylon attack, Admiral Cain. Adama and Cain. Cain is ruthless, having stripped civilian ships for scrap metal and left their occupants to die. President Roslin perceives her nature and urges Adama to kill her. Adama, after first refusing Roslin’s order, agrees. He prepares an assassin: Starbuck, in this series a woman. When Starbuck receives the call from Adama she presumes to be the final order to kill Cain, she hears to her relief Adama telling her the plan is off. He says, “It’s not enough to survive. We have to be worthy of survival.”

In this scene one may see the power of Existentialism. This is from Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism”:

Man is a Project which will only attain essence when he is what he purposes to be... When a man chooses for himself, he chooses for all men. He creates an image of man such as he believes he ought to be... In fashioning myself, I fashion man.

The man named Adama – Adam, which means “Man” – takes this responsibility quite seriously!

In Battlestar Galactica, we may see our predicament: we are the survivors of apocalypse. Our grand mission is not exploration for its

own sake; it is to find our way back home, to Earth, to a more grounded existence. We create our own enemies, terrorism and global warming. And we may see two models of leadership, and of living: the first, Roslin, finds meaning and strength in sacred story, seeing her life as an echo of her religious ancestors, as a fulfillment of their dreams and labors. The second, Adama, finds meaning and strength in knowing that in each action he makes, each word, each silence, he is creating humankind.

Both find strength in some of the ways Parker describes, which I will repeat:

In the aftermath of Apocalypse, the religious enterprise can be imagined as a kind of salvage work, recognizing the resources that sustain and restore life – resources that are ready at hand, not in some distant promised land... We know ourselves to be living in a time of breakdown and breakthrough, chaos and creativity, fragmentation and resourcefulness, pain and grace. Our tasks include tending to injury in ourselves and others, collecting resources buried in the rubble, and constructing shelters for body and spirit, family and community.

Please join me in the spirit of prayer... or of meditation.

Parker, Rebecca Ann. "After the Apocalypse" in *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now* (Skinner House: 2006).