

Imagine What a World it Could Be ...

Over the past several days, much ado has been made over the role of religious faith in helping to heal the nation. There has even been a significant push to get prayer back in the public schools. I do not wish to diminish the strength religion gives to many people, but being an agnostic, as I know quite a few of you are as well, I must draw my strength from a different well, my hope for the future. Bound tightly to that hope are the edicts of science, the promises and empowerment of technology, humanity's many virtues, and the breathtaking elegance of the universe around us, for these are the things that have guided me on my path as a human for as long as I can remember.

Science provides a structure for extracting information from the world around us, giving us an opportunity to make logical and reasoned decisions. Technology allows us to extend our bodies and minds, giving us the opportunity to alter our environment and circumstances for the better. Our virtues include compassion, love, kindness, incredible creativity, communication, imagination, and many, many more. The universe rightly humbles us, but for some I suppose, not enough.

On the Friday before this all happened, I bought one of my favorite movies, on a whim. That movie is "Contact", based on the incredible novel by Carl Sagan (the billions and billions guy). I must have watched it 5 or 6 times before Tuesday (indicating perhaps that I have no life). One of the lines from the movie that resonated with me was voiced by Jodie Foster when her character was asked what she would ask of an alien civilization if she could ask only one question. Her reply: How did you do it - how did you make it so far without destroying yourselves?

I've been asking myself that question over and over again since Tuesday. I have memories as a small child of watching people kill each other on the evening news, whether it be from the Iran/Iraq war, Ireland, or any number of conflicts that happened in the late seventies and onward. I remember being told as a child that I could die at any moment from global nuclear war. I even picked out a song to listen to in that event, Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue, which is approximately the same length of time it takes from launch to impact. So many times it seems, we were alarmingly close to that destruction point. In the twelve years since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, I began to realize that perhaps I could have a long and fulfilling life.

I don't want to lose that opportunity, for me, or for anyone else on this planet. I don't want this young and struggling civilization to simply snuff out right at the moment it could come of age. In the past century, among all of the tragedies and horrors, holocausts and mass despeciation, we have learned about so much, from quarks to DNA to extrasolar planets to quasars, blackholes, and the big bang. We have built antennae to speak across vast distances, dishes to listen, telescopes to see. Right now, a probe we have built is tumbling past the edge of our solar system. A few of us even got to live on and explore the Moon. Deep down, we have found a need, and the opportunity, to reach out from our lonely planet, to make real connections that transcend the confines of our frail and mortal

coils.

Our minds are ready for our civilization to mature (and the process will not be easy). But we still suffer from our myriad insecurities, which generally trigger our violent responses. Personally, the way I have overcome them in myself, is to know myself, to understand my feelings, and how, when, and under what circumstances a variety of hormones interact within my body. Perhaps that is just the geek in me talking.

In Greek mythology, there are two gods of war, Ares (Mars), and Athena. Ares was hot-tempered and petulant. He wielded a fiery sword and was feared. No temples were ever built in Greece to honor him. Athena was reasoned, wise, and calm. She was considered to be the protector of civilized life, and fought only in defense. She brandished a shield called Aegis, which means technology. Both Ares and Athena are inside each of us, and are in conflict. Perhaps this is where, and why, faith is so important to so many people, like closing your eyes and falling backwards into the arms of a friend.

Vincent Van Gogh said that in order to paint, he would dream what he wanted to paint, and then paint what he dreamt. Let us imagine the world we want to live in, and let us have the courage to build it.