1. Star Trek and the Human Rights Idea in the Age of Atomic Bombs and Viet Nam

Are you here for Star Trek or Human Rights?

I heard the blast as I felt the shockwave move through my chest. Screams. Confusion.

Then I realized a grenade had exploded on the other side of the open-air café in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli where, in the Spring of 2013, my American research team, Syrian refugee students, and I were working on a project to help young people displaced by war find their way back into universities and exercise their human right to education.

Unbeknownst to us, two-man teams on motorbikes had fanned out into the city, throwing grenades at open government buildings and businesses, like the one we were in, to enforce a general strike. The strike had been called because a rebel-held Crusader-era citadel just across the border in Syria, the Krak des Chevaliers, had fallen to the Syrian army the day before. An important redoubt for the rebels, its loss was a real blow to the beleaguered opposition. I thought it would be a major turning point in the war and might even signal that it would soon come to an end. I was wrong. The war has continued. A half million are dead and millions more are in exile.

We were ok. The explosion had been more loud than destructive. The Syrian students were calm. One smiled and told me: “Hey. Don’t worry professor. This was like a regular day back home.”

At our offices in East Beirut that evening, I watched my colleagues deal with the trauma and confusion of that morning in their own ways. One leaned out over our balcony and chain-smoked cigarettes. I had never seen him smoke before — or since. Another had found a bottle of Lebanese red.
Me? I sat at my laptop under a pair of headphones and watched the 1968 Star Trek episode “A Private Little War.” Perhaps best remembered as the one where the Mugato, a furry rhino-horned beast bites Enterprise’s Captain James T. Kirk, played by William Shatner, with poisonous fangs, and ship’s doctor Leonard “Bones” McCoy (De Forest Kelly) seeks help from the local pre-modern Hill People to cure him.

I have watched that episode a couple dozen times — at least. The first time was beside my mom when it premiered half a century ago. Later, on our family’s black-and-white television in syndicated reruns on a UHF station at the furthest end of the dial. I watched it on basic cable with college friends, something we did often. I remember drinking Rainer beer and casting a sidelong glance at the Edward Said devotee who wanted to impress us with his critique of Nancy Kovack’s Nona, the Kahn-ut-tu woman who used her knowledge of bio-pharmaceuticals to cure Kirk — all the while with a bare midriff and in an orange furry vest. Now my teenagers, humoring their dad, watch with me on an enormous hi-definition T.V. and on demand.

That night in Beirut was different.

The screen’s blue glow was the only light in my room. I didn’t watch the episode to escape the events of the day. I watched because I knew that the story and the act of watching it would help me begin to make sense of what I had experienced and guide my thinking about the kinds of massive human rights abuse, inhumanity and cruelty that we had only just glimpsed in the coffee house. It wasn’t just the plot, though in this case it did have some relevance.

The story: The Federation’s implacable enemy, the Klingons, have begun to spread their nefarious influence on the planet Neural. The planet is inhabited by peoples with
limited technology. When Enterprise’s first officer Spock is shot, Kirk concludes that Klingons have supplied one group on the planet, the urbanized villagers, with flintlock rifles — a technological innovation they could not have made themselves. The crew of Enterprise is faced with the dilemma of honoring the non-violent and peaceful ideology of the indigenous inhabitants or maintaining the strategic balance of power in their corner of the Milky Way.

NBC broadcast the episode at the very height of the US involvement in the Vietnam War. Over a half-million American soldiers were deployed in the field, many of whom were draftees. Within a week of the episode’s airing, the Tet Offensive would take place, shattering confidence in the war’s purpose and by year’s end CBS news anchorman Walter Cronkite called the war unwinnable. It was the year of the My Lai Massacre, when US soldiers killed 500 Vietnamese civilians; it was the year an unnamed Army officer told reporter Peter Arnett, “It became necessary to destroy the town to save it;” it was the year an NBC cameraman, Võ Sùru, filmed South Vietnamese Police General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan summarily execute a captured and handcuffed Viet Cong officer by shooting him in the temple with his .38 Special.

Like any war witnessed from afar, it made little sense and the clear cut yet crude narrative of an anti-Communist crusade collapsed in the images of the war crimes, human rights abuse and body bags Americans saw on their television screens while eating dinner. But even in 1968 support for the war remained high, and questioning its legitimacy was tantamount to national betrayal. “A Private Little War” carved out a moment in prime time where it was safe to ask about the meaning of the war.

Kirk makes it clear that the episode was about Vietnam:
KIRK: Bones, do you remember the twentieth century brush wars on the Asian continent? Two giant powers involved, much like the Klingons and ourselves. Neither side felt it could pull out.

MCCOY: Yes, I remember. It went on bloody year after bloody year.

The archive of communications between the creator of Star Trek, Gene Roddenberry, and the episode’s writer Don Ingalls, shows that they argued about how the war and its ethical and political dimensions should shape the story. Like many, Roddenberry saw the war as an unpleasant necessity, and watered down so much of Ingalls’ anti-war sentiment, that he removed his name from the final credits and it replaced with the pseudonym, Jud Crucis, a not-so-subtle play on Jesus Crucified. The conflict between Roddenberry and Ingalls, who had been friends since their days as LAPD officers, anticipates the great social and generational cleavages that the events of 1968 set in motion.

As the episode ends, Kirk is left with the choice to arm the Hill People and we are left with a lack of clarity about what will happen next in his exchange with the ship’s chief engineer, Montgomery Scott:

KIRK: Spock, ask Scotty how long it would take him to reproduce a hundred flintlocks.

SCOTT: I didn’t get that exactly, Captain. A hundred what?

KIRK: A hundred serpents. Serpents for the Garden of Eden. We’re very tired, Mister Spock. Beam us up home.

With not just the American defeat in Vietnam in mind, Kirk’s final words to Mr. Spock remain a melancholic critique of America’s seemingly unending wars, covert, overt, proxy, and dirty, around the planet in the 50 years since.

That night in Beirut I, too, was very tired.
Now it was another war with another cast of characters. Still one with the question of arming one group against another; foreign intervention by super and lesser-powers, the use of poison gas and disturbing reports, since confirmed multiple times, of attacks on schools, universities and hospitals.

“A Private Little War” is somewhat unique among Star Trek episodes in that ends without a clear resolution and on a pessimistic note. Kirk knows that regardless of his course of action humanoid suffering would continue. Maybe that is why I watched it that night from the dozens of other episodes of the original series and the other sequel series (The Next Generation, Deep Space Nine and Voyager) which fill my hard drive — a chance to see the Mugato and Nona was probably another reason. I wasn’t worried that my work was a problem along the lines of what Kirk and the Klingons were doing. It was that I knew it wouldn’t be enough. It could never be enough. The trauma of war I’d experienced that day was just a glimpse into the kind of ceaseless suffering that was going on all around me and I could do almost nothing about it.

This is the hardest of human rights truths. The work of human rights is beset on all sides by failure, lack of resources, and danger, and exists in an uneasy alliance with politics, law and money. What change there is, is incremental at best.

The fact that “A Private Little War” stands out among Trek episodes for its ending and even politics goes to a larger point about Star Trek: it is one of the very few elements of contemporary culture that offers a sustained, collective vision of a future shaped by human reason, science and a commitment to human (and sentient being) rights. That vision is not without its detractors in the show and the real world.
As an academic, we are taught to approach idealism, including the human rights idea, with cynicism. That inclination has always rung hollow for me especially as it often just stands as a poor excuse for substantive theoretical critique. The humanitarian professionals, legal scholars, activists, dissidents and students I’ve known over nearly two decades of teaching and conducting research in Human Rights and directing humanitarian action have little use for that cynicism. Instead I’ve seen much more of the Trek-like confidence in the eternal return to a future based on the certain knowledge that the human impulse for cruelty and indifference is more than matched by the human capacity to defend the rights of Others and to value “infinite diversity in infinite combinations” or in Trek-speak, IDIC.

And while IDIC was introduced as a ploy to market a tchotchke Spock wears in an otherwise unmemorable third and final season episode of TOS, like all invented traditions, from religion to nationalism, this one has shaped the thought, even worldview, of legions of Trekkers who have since imbued that concept with powerful and transcendent real-world meanings. Plus, many of those human rights professionals I’ve known, and not just those who have watched Trek in English but in a host of other languages, and a whole bunch of my Human Rights Studies students and colleagues are Trekkers. More important, I am a Trekker and a human rights professional, and have spent my entire life watching, re-watching and re-re-watching 33 seasons, 770 episodes, and 13 movies of Star Trek.

A decade ago I first taught a seminar called “Star Trek/Human Rights” to lure STEM honors students into a humanities course. On the first day of class, 15 plus University of
California, Davis undergrads crowded into a small seminar room. And I posed to them two questions:

“How many of you are here for Human Rights?” Hands raised.

“How many of you are here for Star Trek?” Hands raised.

And then Rajan Singh – a 2014 graduate in Computer Science – asked me: “Can’t we be here for both?”

_Can’t we be here for both?_ That was a good question.

_Star Trek_ shows us extraordinary technology, what could only be termed "gee whiz" physics, and subjects us to some utterly nonsensical technobabble, a portmanteau coined by Trek writers themselves in the notes they wrote on scripts. It is good Science Fiction, after all. It has anticipated everything from cell phones, hand-held diagnostic medical tools, and androids, to the use of computers and virtual reality in warfare, sex, entertainment and teaching. In this regard, little distinguishes it from the other grand SciFi narratives and space operas that have played out on TVs and movies screens over of the last half century: _Star Wars, Space Battleship Yamato, and Battlestar Galactica._

Still, Trek is different. Nichelle Nichols — Lt. Uhura in TOS — and the first African-American woman to play an officer of any kind on any TV show reminisces in interviews about how Gene Roddenberry would remind her that, unlike those other shows and movies, _Trek_ was about “something” and that even she, as an African American in a role of authority and leadership, was part of that project.

Nichols, herself, is at the center of one Trek’s most enduring legends of the immense social meaning and impact of the series. As she explained (2011) to NPR’s Michel Martin, she considered leaving the show after its first year to pursue her stage career. While
attending an NAACP event in Beverly Hills, she encountered civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who told her he was a Trekker. When he learned that she planned to leave the show, she remembers him telling her, “don’t you understand what this man [Roddenberry] has achieved? For the first time, we are being seen the world over as we should be seen. He says, do you understand that this is the only show that my wife Coretta and I will allow our little children to stay up and watch. I was speechless.”1 It is a truly moving story.

Star Trek continued to place women and people of color in positions of leadership, even building entire series around African-American actors Avery Brooks — Commander Benjamin Sisko of Deep Space Nine — and Sonequa Martin-Green — Discovery’s Michael Burnham. As a consequence, the show has many prominent African Americans among its followers: President Barrack Obama confessed to Nichols that he is a Trekker; and leading Democrat politician and novelist Stacey Abrams is, as well. Very rarely though, is the concept of race addressed directly, as though somehow it is a problem only of our benighted time.

From its inception Star Trek was both space opera and about something. As a global cultural phenomenon, with its stories and casting it has engaged with pressing social and cultural issues, anxieties and aspirations, and more so with a broad, multi-generational landscape of human rights and the myriad artefacts of human rights failures; it has mirrored how human rights have been understood, violated and experienced across that half century; and it has expressed confidence that adhering to the human rights idea is the best chance we have as a species to survive.
Most Human follows the Human Rights Idea as it has passed through the lens of the last 50 years of Star Trek television shows and movies. From discussion of genocide, refugees, human sexuality, rape, the sentience of robots and the rights of AI, to most unforgottably, the torture of Enterprise’s Captain Jean Luc Picard, human rights language, concepts and images course throughout the Trek.

This book is about something else. It is a contribution to the building of a broad and powerful story of human rights. To achieve that end, the story must be alive in our unfolding present if it is to be a meaningful driver in the creation of just and peaceful societies. The full building of that story requires much more than a beloved multigenerational SciFi franchise could be asked to do, of course. That said, for modern people the future has meaning in the present. To make that future have meaning they use their imagination, experience and creativity to construct archetypes and tell stories. Human Rights as an idea and politics is a powerful story about one kind of future that while distant does not feel so out of reach. The story writ-large provides young people with role models (real and imaginary) and helps them grow into human rights advocates and defenders.

The achievement of that future is possible only because the last 50 years have witnessed remarkable positive achievements in human rights around the world. As the important Human Rights scholar, Kathryn Sikkink explains in her Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21st Century, “we are in a period of vibrant dynamism in human rights movements, laws, and institutions. Recent developments around the world and in the United States have led some to despair, but by looking more carefully at the history of human rights and at current trends we can find hope for progress in spite of struggles and backlash.” I share her optimism, as both a good Trekker and human rights
scholar who has seen much of the same evidence that she has. Despair is not only incommensurate with on-the-ground realities, it enjoins inaction, drives cynicism and breeds apathy. Most important: it is not logical.

I still have more concern than she about the human rights story and the durability of the body of archetypes, narratives, histories, and most important popular culture, that inspire human rights action. While that story has formed our understanding of human rights’ in the past and future tenses, it is being drowned in a new global assault on human rights laws and institutions, human rights defenders, and human rights organizations. The new assaults on human rights are driven by demagogues and dictators who are adept at weaving stories around the very worst of human impulses and fears: hatred of the other, be that other refugees, people of a different color, or sexual minorities — the alien in every sense of the word.

Sikkink tells us to embrace hope (I prefer the word optimism) driven by the data that prove human rights make peoples’ lives better, especially when compared with the alternatives of military intervention, top-down international development programs and anti-democratic systems. Still, she and I are social scientists and feel comfortable in that world of data, often to the point of forgetting how easy it is to become lost in it and expecting it to tell a story without help. We can forget how important the human rights story, or perhaps more correctly human rights stories are, to the effectiveness and resilience of the human rights idea in practice, especially when those stories are told well.

We have to tell better human rights stories.
American politician, diplomat and former First Lady of the United States Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962) could tell a good story and in the 1950s she became human rights’ story-teller-in-chief and the first global human rights activist.

Roosevelt had shared the White House for 13 years with her husband, the American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had died in office during his fourth term in 1945. Franklin Roosevelt had made the human rights idea part of the reason for the American participation in the Second World War and advocated for the creation of the United Nations. However, as the Charter of the UN began to take shape in the closing months of the war, its framers were more concerned about collective security and monetary policy and less about human rights. Only with tremendous pressure from civil society organizations and advocacy by the delegations from South American countries where the human rights idea had become part of broader political discourse did the Charter list human rights as one of the organization’s purposes. While the horrors of the Nazi effort to exterminate Jews and other “undesirables” in Europe were known, the full understanding of the extent of the Holocaust played a less of a role in that decision at that time.

After months of preliminary debate, in early 1945, representatives of 50 nations travelled to San Francisco. On June 26, they gathered in the city’s War Memorial Opera House and signed a document that read, in part,

> to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women... establish an international organization to be known as the United Nations.
Trekkers and others have long asked why San Francisco plays such a prominent role in the series? Enterprise (NCC 1701) was constructed in a nearby navy yard. In 2161, the charter establishing the United Federation of Planets was also signed in the city. It is home to Starfleet Academy and Federation Headquarters. The character Hikaru Sulu was born in San Francisco; Kirk’s swanky bachelor pad overlooking Alcatraz and the Berkeley Hills is there, too. The city's progressive politics and association with high technology attracted Roddenberry and subsequent writers to locate much of the series’ Earth-side action in it — plus the Golden Gate Bridge makes an immediately recognizable establishing shot.

San Francisco was a new start for humanity. Roddenberry, who had also fought in the war, embraced that idea of a new liberal and rights-based world order that held such promise in that historical moment. At the center of that progress would not be a nation state. Rather an all-humanity encompassing planetary institution, the UN, would elide human conflict and promote cooperation. It is not a coincidence that the emblem used by the Federation bears a striking resemblance to the UN’s.

In human rights history, the events of San Francisco were a foundational moment. It was the first time the human rights idea was introduced as an answer to the question of how to prevent the kind of war humanity had just passed through from happening again. It placed responsibility for the promotion and protection of human rights firmly into the organization’s ambit. Before World War II the human rights idea had been something only marginal figures in international law advocated. Rights were something the state gave citizens, some of whom were, legally and by practice, more equal than others on the basis of religion, gender, ethnicity and wealth.
One of the lessons of WWII and the years just before is that a state could have a constitution and a body of laws protecting the rights of its citizens and still violate those rights at will. The most egregious examples of states doing this is seen in the genocides and episodes of mass violence across the period 1915-1945. When the Ottoman Empire exterminated its Armenian citizens in 1915 or the German Reich and its allies sought to do the same to Europe’s Jews in the 1940s, not only were the people targeted for killing citizens of states, the destruction of their culture, and theft of their property and children was legal.

Human rights did not figure in the mandate of the UN’s predecessor the League of Nations, at all. When thinkers like the Russian Jewish émigré André Mandelstam (1869-1949), who had had a long career as diplomat before the Russian Revolution (1918) and lived as a refugee in Paris during the interwar period, proposed that instead of basing rights not on national citizenship but instead on the fact of our shared humanity, they were ignored and ridiculed by legal scholars and governments alike.

The problem was that UN committed itself to human rights at a moment when there was only a vague notion of what human rights are. One of the organization’s first acts was the establishment of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (1946), which met for the in early 1947 at the UN’s temporary headquarters in Lake Success, New York under the leadership of Eleanor Roosevelt. Although her husband had died, she had not retreated from public life. Rather she accepted appointment as chair of the commission and would lead a colossal project to define the human rights we all have simply because we are human beings. Few people had the prestige she had and her appointment was evidence of American support for the human rights idea.
Eleanor brought more than the reflected honor of her late husband to that project. Throughout her time as First Lady and even before, she had been active in women’s and civil rights movements. From helping to desegregate the Air Force through her support of the Tuskegee Airmen to opposing the internment of Japanese Americans, she had demonstrated a commitment to using her position to foster human rights, as well as the political acumen that she would need as she took leadership of the UN Human Rights Commission.

The General Assembly of the UN had charged Eleanor and her commission with proposing a treaty that would define human rights. She was supposed to report back in a matter of months with a binding document all states would sign. Instead, almost two years passed before that document was produced. Objections from member states and an emerging rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union meant that a formal, binding treaty would not be possible, and instead the commission proposed the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. The UDHR would be a statement of principles outlining a consensus of the rights we all have.

The authors proposed 30 human rights. The first 20 establish the right from having a government arbitrarily take your life, liberty or property; the right to equality before the law and in marriage; the right from having the state attack your dignity, torture you; take your freedom of speech, your choice of religion, your thoughts, your vote; your citizenship, your ability to move and seek asylum. The final ten outline a human being’s rights to work, leisure, science and culture, copyright to intellectual property, food, an education and a free and fair world order. It assures us that nobody can take these rights away and that collectively, as humanity, we have the responsibility to protect the rights of others. Another
generation would pass before the UDHR would become international law in the form of two major treaties, the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1956); and the *International Convent on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, enacted just two months after the premier of *TOS* in 1966.

On December 10, 1948, at Paris’ Palais de Chaillot, Eleanor presented the final draft to the member states of the UN. The building had been the site of the 1937 Exposition International des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne, a kind of world’s fair to which European countries soon to be at war demonstrated their prowess in technology and the arts. The Palais is associated with two other major moments in human rights’ public memory. Pablo Picasso’s landmark of modern art and indictment of war, *Guernica* was first displayed in Spain’s pavilion in the Palais. A tapestry copy of the painting hangs now in the Manhattan headquarters of the UN just beside the entrance to the hall where the Security Council meets as reminder of its mandate to keep the peace. Just eight years before Eleanor presided over the signing of the UDHR at the Palais, Adolph Hitler, standing next to his chief architect Albert Speer and his favorite sculptor, Arno Breker, had his photograph taken from its main portico. Behind them the Eiffel Tower rises in the fog, a forlorn reminder to us now how vulnerable democracy and modernity are to the corrosive power of fascism and war.

58 countries took part in the vote on a document that rejected what that picture had come to symbolize. 48 voted in favor. Eight abstained and two did not vote. The abstentions came from Communist Party-ruled states like the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Poland — objecting to several of the political rights, and in particular to the right to leave one’s country; South Africa — recognizing the inherent contradiction between human
rights’ insistence on equality and the racist system of Apartheid; and Saudi Arabia — seeing in human rights’ freedom of conscience an invitation to apostasy and humanism. In those votes, one can perceive the first stirrings of the core human rights challenges of racism, authoritarianism, and religious extremism that stood at the center of Trek narratives over the last half century. From struggles against Romulan authoritarianism, the enslavement of robots and even beings made up of photons, to the pronounced lack of Earth-based religious conflict (and religions at all) amongst Star Trek’s humans, the objections raised against the Declaration by perennial human-rights abusing régimes drive the plots of a multiplicity of Trek movies and episodes.

For Eleanor Roosevelt, the passage of the UDHR was only a beginning and the task of building global support for it was the next step. The men — she was the only woman — who served on the commission were a collection of international lawyers and judges, university-based law professors, diplomats and philosophers who inhabited a world far away from the rough and tumble partisan politics of America’s 1930s and 1940s. This is especially the case for René Cassin (1887-1976). The most influential of the commissioners aside from Eleanor, he had a very different journey to the Palais. From the French port city of Bayonne, Cassin grew up in a middle-class Jewish family. Wounded during World War I, he dedicated himself to veterans’ and war victims’ rights and pacifism in the interwar era.

Cassin made an indelible impact on the UDHR and brought the memory of the Holocaust to human rights. In addition to his service on the Human Rights Commission, he was the lead judge on the European Court of Human Rights, which holds European country’s accountable to international human rights law; in 1968 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in creating the modern human rights idea. Cassin believed
strongly in the role of international institutions, non-governmental organizations like the Consultative Council of Jewish Organizations, which he founded in 1946 and which is now named for him, and international law to support and defend human rights. These tools form the bedrock of modern human rights advocacy, law, and policy. The effectiveness of these tools is limited, however, by a host of factors, including the extent of government interference or support of human rights and the degree to which popular opinion rallies behind the Human Rights Idea.

Eleanor Roosevelt understood from the very beginning of her work that for human rights to play the role the framers of the UDHR like Cassin hoped for it, that covenants and treaties, laws and legal scholarships would not be enough. She after all, was more political activist than legal scholar. As a good activist, she knew the value of a good story and was willing to use Atomic Age tools, like television, to tell it.

To build support for the UDHR and human rights, the UN designated December 10th as International Human Rights Day. Both to commemorate the signing of the UDHR and to educate people — not governments — about what human rights are, why we must have them and what to do to protect them. On the first of these commemorations in 1951 KSD, Channel 5 (the local NBC affiliate that would later show Trek), broadcast a talk by Eleanor Roosevelt recorded in their studio. On black and white televisions throughout St. Louis she appeared, dressed in a fur stole, pearls, and speaking in the crisp and clear diction of the mythical Mid-Atlantic accent, to tell the story of the UDHR:

The object [of Human Rights Day] is to make people everywhere conscious of the importance of human rights and freedoms….The reason for that is that these are spoken of and emphasized in the Charter of the United Nations, and the declaration
was written to elaborate the rights already mentioned in the charter and to emphasize also, for all of us, the fact that the building of human rights would be one of the foundation stones, on which we would build in the world, an atmosphere in which peace can grow³

“These things must be well understood,” shifting away from law and diplomacy, “because even though you pass, you accept treaties and countries ratify those treaties, the real change, which must give to people throughout the world their human rights, must come about in the hearts of people.” Beneath the grandmotherly smile was an outline for a global cultural shift where human rights would form the basis of human society and not just a new form of international law. It was a radical agenda, then and now, that still must have seemed very reasonable and sensible while being explained by someone as trusted as she.

The speech was more than just a lesson. It was also a promise. Looking straight into the camera she told the viewers, “If we observe these rights, for ourselves and for others, I think we will find that it is easier in the world to build peace because war destroys all human rights and freedoms, so in fighting for those we fight for peace.”⁴ A new world built on rights and peace surely spoke to those who had lost so much during the war.

Throughout the 1950s and up to her death in 1962, Eleanor continued to appear on television, write magazine articles, and advocate for the UDHR and the human rights idea. Alongside her efforts, the UN, primarily through the work of the United Nations Educational Social and Culture Organization (UNESCO) promoted International Human Rights Day with books and pamphlets on human rights and in its magazine *UNESCO Courier*. School children in the US and throughout the world commemorated the event with essay contests and the reading of the UDHR in multiple languages.
It continues to be celebrated, though not with the intensity of those years just following the Declaration. Still Eleanor Roosevelt’s legacy is clear. In 2018 80% of Americans told pollsters that they believe in human rights and globally that number is close to 75.5 Americans overwhelming support having the UN do more to support and promote human rights, and when for example when the US government began the practice of separating children from their migrant parents at borders, 60% of Americans rightly called it a “human rights violation.6”

The human rights idea became so thoroughly woven into global consciousness because of both Eleanor’s focus on building a culture of human rights and Cassin’s emphasis on the role of law and institutions. Human Rights was a story that was buttressed by the forces of law and diplomacy and supported by a network of organizations. That combination of forces — cultural and institutional — is what made realistic an idea that could have been (and still often is) dismissed as impractical, idealistic or even delusional. In the rights hands, this new document and the idea it promoted provided global justification for changing minds about racial equality, the rights of women, and the wrongness of violence, and would serve as a palette from which liberal idealist storytellers, like Roddenberry, could draw.

Following a few years flying for Pan Am, and a couple crashes, including one in the Syrian desert, Roddenberry took a position in the public relations division of the LAPD. From there he wrote and sold stories about cops and cowboys to the television studios and production companies in and around Los Angeles. Earning a reputation as a solid formulaic writer he left the LAPD to pursue writing full time. By 1957 he had become one of the chief writers for Have Gun – Will Travel, which ran from 1957-1962. Set some time in
the mythical post-US Civil War West the show follows the adventures of an enigmatic ex-US Army officer and Renaissance man living out of an opulent hotel in San Francisco whom we only know as Paladin. Played by Richard Boone, Paladin would take jobs as a gun-for-hire who solved problems, usually without recourse to his gun.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s one could not turn on the television without seeing horses, saloons, gunfights and bland, repetitive and predictable storylines where women, Jews, Armenians, Italians, Latinos, Asians and African and Native Americans were mostly invisible, and if they did appear, it was often as cruel and demeaning stereotypes.

*Have Gun – Will Travel* did much of that as well, however in a few scripts, many by Roddenberry, and also those by other future *Star Trek* writers, Don Ingalls and Gene Coon, the show departed from the standard Western format to portray indigenous peoples, ethnic Chinese immigrants and minorities in a less prejudicial way — at least by the standards of the day. One episode in particular, “The Hanging Cross” is an example of his experiments with bending the genre of the Western to his will. The story: a rancher believes a child living with the local Pawnee is his. The Pawnee had adopted the child from another group who had taken him in a raid. An equitable solution is arrived at, not before Paladin comments on the role of the bystander in permitting violence and the inability of white people to keep their word or treaty obligations.

Without meaning to, when viewed from the present the episode flips the reality of the day. From the late 19th century even past the time that Roddenberry penned that episode governments were forcibly removing generations of indigenous children in the US and Canada from their families and incarcerating them in what were called in American, Boarding Schools and in Canada, Residential Schools. The intent was to disconnect
indigenous peoples from their culture, language and heritage as a way to foster assimilation into dominant culture. The practice only ended in 1970s with the passage of the Indigenous Children's Welfare Act. The schools were sites of terrible human rights abuse, sexual assault and violence. I find it hard to imagine that even had he wanted, Roddenberry would not have been able to get that kind of story past CBS executives. These are the painful blind spots in dominant histories, even those narratives written by well-meaning liberals embracing non-violence and the promotion of human rights and dignity. In building a modern human rights narrative a chief goal is to make visible other voices and more narratives, especially the painful ones, part of the mainstream. Regardless, Star Trek inherited from these earlier Westerns a mostly unexamined romanticism about and the exploration, occupation and exploitation of the Americas, in the form of deep space exploration and colonization. That lack of examination leaves out from the narrative the genocide of indigenous peoples and constructs the exploitation of “uninhabited” lands or planets as a right, if not an overarching good.

With its Noir, ambiguous and sometimes brutal storylines, Have Gun – Will Travel was not a standard TV Western of the time in the same way that Star Trek is not just a space opera. Indeed For Roddenberry, Paladin’s adventures showed the possibilities of using television to tell complex stories with larger meaning that could be still be entertaining enough to make it past ratings-conscious and craven studio executives.

In March 1964, he authored the pitch for what would become Star Trek. It did not have Kirk, rather a Captain Robert April (a name Roddenberry had first used for a selfless prison chaplain in two episodes of Have Gun – Will Travel): no Enterprise, instead Yorktown was the name of the ship. It did have a Spock, who was to look more like the
devil and not be the complex character we know. For the benefit of TV executives with short attention spans and limited imaginations, he pitched it as “Wagon Train in Space,” a reference to the most popular conventional episodic Western of the day. It is very clear from the pitch, however, that this would be something different – something that pushed hard against the conventions of the Western and the culture that produced it.

Of course, the captain was a standard youthful white hero, but his first officer was to be a woman “dark in a Nile Valley way;” another bridge officer was named José Ortega, described as “brilliant” and “full of humor and a Latin temperament.” Recall, that this was a time when Latino men in Westerns were only portrayed as criminals or as clownish and lazy; and one could never even conceive of a woman in a command roll, let alone an African or Middle Eastern woman. Some of the proposed script ideas, were likewise, out of this world, at least beyond the social norms and conventions of the mid-1960s. Most are “adventure stories” but three, in particular, indicate a very different direction, which at the time (and even now) raised the collective eyebrows of studio executives. They also point to questions being asked within a contemporary human rights framework.

“Reason.” In the Isaac IV Group, a world where intelligent life has died, leaving a perfectly functioning robot society. Long speculative problem on Earth, this requires detailed investigation and analysis, even at the risk of the Cruiser’s reconnaissance party pretending to be robots themselves. Can a robot be capable of emotional felling”? Can it be capable of reasoning in human terms? What happens when an efficient robot society discovers alien flesh and blood spies in its midst?

“A Question of Cannibalism.” Visiting the Earth colony on Regulus, April’s sortie party became aware of the cow-like creatures raised on the ranches there are
actually intelligent beings. But the colonists, who have built their empire largely on the supply and sale of this meat rebel at the attempt to free their “cattle.”

“Kongo.” [or] The “Ole Plantation Days” of the South with the slight exception of it being white savages who are shipped in and auctioned at the slave mart. Part of our crew is trapped, thought to be runaways, and sold as plantation and household hands.

These reversals, a time-honored dramatic device, allowed Roddenberry to explore core principles of the Star Trek IDIC concept, of course. At the same time, deeper and perhaps in the case of AI, prescient questions were being asked. Can robots have rights; should humans exploit (in this case, eat) intelligent non-human biological beings; how best to remember and address the horror of slavery?

As one might imagine, most studios took a hard pass, but the only one owned by a woman, Lucille Ball’s Desilu Studios bought it. Star Trek premiered in primetime on NBC in Fall 1966, just weeks before I was born. A few of the original pitch ideas came through. Yes, it had an African woman on the bridge, Uhura – albeit as a communications officer in a miniskirt; and instead of a Latino science officer, a Japanese-American helmsman. George Takei’s dashing and athletic, Sulu. NBC starved the show and it was cancelled after three years. But it lived on in syndication where its popularity and following grew year after year.

During those three seasons, episodes aired that are so memorable that they have become woven into our everyday consciousness and cultural references: Tribbles, “Beam me up, Scotty!” and Redshirts. Just as those ideas remain present in popular culture, and have been buttressed by the follow-on series and films, the numerous episodes that
responded to the human rights issues and political challenges of the 60s resonant today and can give us sense of how people in those eras, and later, were thinking about rights and also the multi-generational nature of human rights questions.

Think: “Let That Be Your Last Battlefield” from the final TOS season. Better known as the “one with the guy who is white on one side and black on the other and the other guy who is the other way around.” Oliver Crawford, a long-time Hollywood writer who had been blacklisted for his unwillingness to “name names” before the House Committee on Un-American Affairs in the 1950s wrote the screenplay.

The story: the right-side white and left-side black Lokai, a political fugitive from the planet Cheron, is being pursued by the left-side white and right-side black Bele, “Chief officer of the Commission on Political Traitors.” Bele, we find has been chasing Lokai for millennia. We learn from Lokai that left-side blacks were enslaved, rebelled and then faced genocide; while Bele assures the crew that change is slowly coming to Cheron and his fellow right-side blacks were only responding to terrorism and enforcing the law. Lokai gathers followers on Enterprise and claims political asylum, a key human right and Article 14 of the UDHR. Bele, played by the comic Frank Gorshin, fearing that the Federation might grant it, uses his immense psychic powers to hijack the ship. A standoff with Kirk ensues and eventually the antagonists return to their home planet where all trace of civilization has vanished. As the episode concludes, the multiethnic bridge officers engage in colloquy on race and violence:

Uhura: “It doesn't make any sense.”

Spock: “To expect sense from two mentalities of such extreme viewpoints, is not logical.”
Sulu: “But their planet’s dead. Does it matter now which one of them was right?”

Spock: “Not to Lokai and Bele. All that matters to them is their hate.”

Uhura: “Do you suppose that’s all they ever had, sir?”

Kirk: “No... but that’s all they have left.”

It is a heavy-handed episode about race and the illogical nature of racism. When we imagine human rights and Star Trek this is one of the first episodes that comes to mind. It does end on a quintessentially Trek confident note that the ethnic and racial tension of the late 60s were something temporary and would end. *There was persecution on Earth once. I remember reading about it in my history class.* Walter Koenig’s Chekov, tells Sulu, who responds: *Yes, but it happened way back in the twentieth century. There’s no such primitive thinking today.*

That conclusion is problematic as it places Lokai and Bele on an ambiguous field of false equivalence – one that ignores the possibility of racism’s deep history of injustice and oppression or the fact that genocide and slavery have no “other side” requiring equal time. Perhaps that level of analysis was too much to ask of television in 1969 but it should not be for us now.

Trekkers approach *Star Trek* with a kind of reverence that makes little or no sense to most people. It resembles the way Deadheads will endlessly debate which performance of “Althea” is superior, or how sailors can fear and love the sea. That reverence has never immunized Trek against criticism — often crippling so — either of its stories or ethical shortfalls by Trekkers themselves. Instead I have seen that criticism from the basis of what constitutes a reflective practice, especially as the older series, like TOS and TNG are re-
evaluated in the light of LGBTQ rights and movements against sexual harassment; or when measured against changing attitudes about colonialism, torture and the portrayal of ethnic and religious minorities in popular culture. Each successive series of Trek has sought to broaden the inclusion of human difference either in the experiences of its crew or in the humanoid aliens they encounter in their journeys.

While much more is at stake for them, I have seen in the best of human rights activists and thinkers a pragmatic humility driving a similar reflective practice. That practice results in a constant reevaluation of how rights are strengthened as are the tools and techniques of advocacy. In the last 70 years that practice has led to questioning assumptions about the autonomy of the individual within her community, especially in the way indigenous communities interact with the human rights idea, and at others why classes and categories of rights are denied on the basis of prevailing social and cultural norms. A growing recognition of the rights of sexual minorities and advocacy on their behalf is another example. Gay rights were not an element of the UDHR in 1948; in 2012 the UN dedicated International Human Rights Day to LGBT rights. Affirming the nature of those rights on that occasion, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, stated, "LGBT rights are human rights. Together we will build a world that is free and equal.”

Star Trek followed that move, but did not lead it much to the disappointment of many associated with the series. In TOS same-sex relationships were inconceivable; a normal, though tragic and doomed romance (like all Starfleet relationships) between two men is an ongoing and unremarkable subplot of the most recent series, Discovery. Between those two extremes, the series struggled with how to portray same-sex relationships and LGBT rights struggles in ways that are just plain cringe inducing or painful to watch with contemporary eyes.
When the reflective practice of human rights professionals fails, the human rights idea too fails. The worst outcome of that failure are the moments when recourse is made to human rights to justify invasion and occupation. America’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq of the last generation have been justified in part on the basis of protecting the human rights of women and ethnic minorities. To paraphrase the revisionist historian of Human Rights Samuel Moyn, humanitarian intervention rarely is. Star Trek’s Prime Directive, which proscribes interference in another planet’s development was first articulated by TOS series writer Gene Coon as a response to the US involvement in the Viet Nam War. In retrospect, it illuminates the inherent hypocrisy that accompanies the entire notion of violent humanitarian intervention.

By the same token, Star Trek is a document of the West. This is where the reflective practice of Trek, and in the same sense, human rights advocacy has been the weakest. As a consequence, its encounter with the human rights idea is still very much one structured by Western expectations and hierarchies of rights. Consider the charge given to Enterprise and her crew: “To explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no man has gone before!” The sentence oozes an arrogance that seems at odds with the reality of the Trek universe in which it is only “we” who have not been there before. The human rights challenges we face as a species require the humility and patience to the degree that “boldly going” may not be the best way forward for humanity.

The title of this book, Most Human, is taken from Kirk’s eulogy for Spock at the end of the best of the Trek films “Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan” (1982.)
The story: Spock has sacrificed himself to save Enterprise in the aftermath of the Battle of Mutara Nebula. Dead of radiation exposure, Spock's body is to be ejected into space and land on a new planet formed by the Genesis Device. Kirk tells the assembled crew “Of my friend I can only say this: of all the souls, I have encounter in my travels, his was the most human.” Seasoned Trekkers will recite those lines in unison with Kirk. And while we all know that Spock returns and lives another three decades, tears will well in many eyes. Spock is only half human. He has spent much of Trek on a quest to understand humanity and his human side, a theme that recurs in all the other Treks with different characters including the artificial life form Data of TNG and Voyager’s former-Borg, Seven of Nine. Kirk may be signaling that that quest has reach a conclusion in Spock’s sacrifice for his friends.

The Human Rights Idea is in the end about the right to be fully human and the responsibility to recognize and support the humanity of others in an age of vast inhumanity and in the shadow of the human capacity of self-annihilation. The human in Kirk’s eulogy is not the human that is capable of that destruction. Instead, Spock is a being who is, in the words of the first article of the UDHR, “endowed with reason and conscience” and who acts “towards...another in a spirit of brotherhood.” When the work of human rights neglects the human side of the equation, it cannot fulfill the promises made by humanity to itself at San Francisco. In same way, the study and promotion of human rights, even as those stories find expression in popular culture, can help us to understand the human rights struggle as experienced by real people, by human beings, that form the bases for human rights action. In my experience, people are not motivated to protect human rights because they appear
on a piece of paper somewhere, but rather by an inexorable need to help people *and* defend their rights.

When Trek, like all good stories human beings have told one another as long as we have been humans, is good, it tells us what it is to be human and reassures us that we can be human.