

SPELUNKING PLATO'S CAVE

Shirley Kinney

April 2, 2000

I have a confession to make—I am a science fiction fan. Maybe even a science fiction addict. It has to be good science fiction, of course—well written, clever ideas, something that will get my mind excited. Science fiction, since it's beginning, has been read by people like me—people who hide it like some lurid steamy paperback, stuffing it between the covers of Plato's Republic or Jane Eyre.

I tell people, "I only read it to cleanse my palate, before diving into another great literary masterpiece." That, of course, is a lie. I read great literary masterpieces to cleanse my mind before diving into another magical world of faraway planets.

This passion of mine for science fiction, though, has made me wonder just what the heck it is that brings me back to it over and over again with such delight.

Is it the fast pace of the action?

Is it the amazing new life discovered on distant planets?

Is it the knowledge that humankind always, or nearly always, wins out over the three-headed, spider-legged alien?

Well, sure it is!

But, what really stirs me about science fiction—its very basis—is the fact that it always happens in the future. So anything is possible. Anything. It hasn't happened yet, so, who knows?

What if, when the aliens from space arrive—and we all know they will someday, don't we?---

What if when they arrive they bring us knowledge of wonders beyond our dreaming?

What if when they arrive they show us how to live together in peace?

What if they show us how to reach the stars?

What if the aliens turn out to be human-like from some Martian Adam and Eve stock?

What if they are robots who have overthrown their creators?

What if they show us what we really are capable of?

What if, what if, anything?

The greatest gift science fiction has given us is two words—What If?

Science fiction tends to follow trends. At one point, it was man's traveling to distant planets and conquering new worlds. That changed to aliens coming to Earth and conquering us. Then a trend toward traveling telepathically.

For a while, in about the 1950's, I think, the trend was to explore inwardly, and re-examine man's existence here and now, but from some unique perspective.

One example of that approach impacted me a great deal, and I have recently talked to a few other people who remember the story vividly—if not the details, then the concept. It was the story we heard on the radio—X Minus One—when I was just a kid.

In the story, man was just learning to go into space and the action centered around two astronauts trying to break free from Earth's bonds and to go beyond the circling stars.

The details are fuzzy to me, but the gist of it is the DRIVE these astronauts felt to break through the barrier that held them. They knew they could break through.

And so the space ship climbed and climbed, leaping up into space—up and up—beyond the stars, then beyond that, until, at last, they ran into a transparent barrier that destroyed the ship.

And, as the camera in our radio panned back, the listeners realized the world of these astronauts—their entire universe—had been contained in a tiny drop of water under a microscope.

What a concept—

What if man, what if we right here are living in a tiny drop of water?

What if God is a big eyeball on the other side of that microscope?

What if our drop of water on that microscope gets left sitting on the window of the lab in the sun and our universe starts to dry up?

Will we call it global warming?

What body of water did our drop come out of ?

How does this change our beliefs?

Have all our assumptions been based on a faulty premise?

What if these two astronauts returned to Earth and tried to tell everyone there that they were all living in a drop of water?

This wild science fiction idea of looking within our lives from a what-if point of view was maybe best explored by a guy in a cave. Well, more by a guy thinking about a cave.

Plato.

I'm sure most of you are well acquainted with Plato's story of the cave. But, let me revisit it with maybe a little different emphasis, because I think it has so much in it to think about.

What if everyone in the world—you and me and everyone else—are now and always have been seated in Plato's cave? You're facing the back wall of the cave. You're in chains so you can't turn around and you can't leave.

You can't turn around to look behind you and you can't turn to face anyone else. All you can see is the back of the cave. You've never seen anything other than that wall.

Every morning the sun comes up outside and moves across the sky. You can't turn around, so you've never seen the sun, but you can see the light from behind you that is reflected onto the wall of the cave.

You see how the light changes.

You can see the shadows of yourself and your fellow cave dwellers and of the creatures of the earth as they pass by the opening to the cave, reflected on the back wall.

The shadows are a little fuzzy and a little dark and there are not many details, but that's all you've ever seen, so they look OK to you.

Let me add a dimension to Plato's story.

Each of you sitting there has the key to your own set of chains. You were given the key when you were born, but no one ever told you what to do with it, only that it was your personal sacred talisman that would save you.

So, in ignorance, you hung it on a cord around your neck and never thought about it except once in awhile, when you were scared or had bad dreams. Then, touching your sacred talisman, it gave you a sense of peace.

Now, let's imagine that one day, you and only you figure out that you can use your key to open your chains. That's a frightening thing to do, since no one you know has ever done it.

So, you slip your chains and you slowly and fearfully turn.

Then, you turn and walk toward the light—that brilliant light—at the opening of the cave.

It's so hard to see with that pure light, but you manage to squint to allow as little light into your eyes as you need to walk around.

It takes time—a long time—for your eyes to adjust.

But still you walk toward that light.

At last you face the outside world and see the sun in the sky and the moon and the trees and the flowers and all the wild creatures that before had appeared to you only as shadows moving across the wall of your cave.

At first you are terrified of these brightly colored objects—you've never seen colors in such intensity before—you never really knew what color was.

And you see all this wonder in three dimensions, not the flat shadows you've seen before. Things are round and square and fat and thin and close and far away.

Soon, the intensity of this light, the pain it causes you to try to see, the struggle your mind is having trying to make sense of it all, drives you back to the comfort of the cave.

Overwhelmed.

You approach your fellow cave dwellers who are still chained, facing only their portion of the wall and you try to tell them what you've seen. To tell them about the world of color and dimension and brilliance.

At first they laugh at you. But, as you persist, they say that you're crazy. There is no such thing as what you describe. They won't listen. But YOU know.

And you can never see your cave world the same way again.

You may sit down next to your fellows. You may put on your chains. But you'll never look at the shadows again without seeing in your mind the colors and the depth and the brilliance of the world you've seen.

And, if you were smart, you'd have kept that key to your chains, so that you could now and then go back out.

I don't mean—and I don't think Plato meant—to say that humans are the sorts of creatures that will sit for a lifetime staring at shadows on a wall and not begin to say what if.

They most certainly would. No doubt they would say from time to time, "This life seems so shallow. There must be more. Why am I here?"

And so, they would begin to what-if ideas.

But, unfortunately, the majority of these what-ifs would be on the order of:

"What if we seal up this dripping ceiling?"

"What if we put in air conditioning in this cave?"

"What if we put some cushions down here underneath us?"

"What if we made some rules on how we should think about these shadows?"

The bigger what-ifs would just get lost in all the day-to-day practicalities of cave living. And fewer and fewer cave dwellers would look at their keys and wonder, “What if these opened something interesting?”

I’ll bet there are cave dwellers that look at that key and say, “What if this opens my chains?” But immediately that thought is followed by, “OOH! THAT’s a scary thought!” Safety is in the shadows.

To illustrate—

Annie Dillard, one of my favorite authors, has modernized Plato’s Cave. She makes the assumption that you have finally been able to convince someone else to release his chains, leave his black shadowy cave, and follow you out into the world. Annie’s cave that you and your friend crawl out from is a modern cave of a darkened living room, lit only by the flicker of the television.

“The blue light of television flickers on the cave wall. If the fellow crawls out of the cave, what does he see? Not the sun itself, but night, and the two thousand visible stars. Once, I tried to converse with him, the fellow who crawled out of his blue-lit cave to the real world. He had looked into this matter of God. He had to shout to make himself heard: ‘How do you stand the wind out here?’”

The wind. Outside all the caves, of course there’s wind, sometimes a lot of it, and probably biting cold on occasion, and rain and snow. And in the cave there’s none of that.

Always a predictable temperature, always a predictable humidity, always a predictable sameness.

And always, always, inside that cave it feels safe.

I’m sure that after you returned to your place in the shadows, you whispered to your neighbor, “Hey, wanta see something really cool?” And you proceed to tell him what you saw outside in the real world.

Odds are pretty good that this other guy would ask for a whole lot of reassurance from you before he’d leave HIS chains for YOUR uncertain new world.

There is another reason most people don’t leave that cave. They PREFER the cave.

It’s so much bother to think, to imagine. It’s bewildering.

It’s a whole lot more fun to sit with one’s fellows in the cave, looking at the black wall, and just goof off. You know, make shadow hand creatures against the wall.

This is a quote from Terry Pratchett that explains the situation beautifully.

“Life in this world...is, as it were, a sojourn in a cave. What can we know of reality? For all we see of the true nature of existence is, shall we say, no more than bewildering and amusing shadows cast upon the inner wall of the cave by the unseen blinding light of absolute truth, from which we may or may not deduce some glimmer of veracity, and we as troglodyte seekers of wisdom can only lift our voices to the unseen and say, humbly, ‘Go on, do Deformed Rabbit...it’s my favorite.’”

If people can’t be enticed toward the Truth, can they be forced toward the Truth?

This is a poem called The Parable of the Burning House by Brecht. I think it was written more speaking to man’s failure to challenge evil. However, I’d like to take out the center of this poem because it says something to this cave idea.

“But in the evening, after they had gone,
 Still seated beneath the bread-tree,
 Talking to those who had not asked him any questions,
 The Buddha told the following parable:
 ‘Recently, I saw a house. It was on fire.
 Flames were licking the roof.
 I stepped closer and saw there were still some people inside.
 I walked through the door and called out:
 Fire! Fire on the roof!
 Suggesting they leave in a hurry.
 But these people seemed unhurried.
 Some asked me,
 While the heat was already singeing their eyebrows,
 What it was like outside,
 And how about the wind,
 And was there another house to live in,
 And questions like that.
 Without replying I walked out on them, thinking,
 These people will have to burn before they stop asking questions.
 Really, my friends, if the heat in the house isn’t hot enough
 For them to be wanting to change for another kind of a house,
 If, in other words, they prefer to stay and burn,
 Well, then, I have nothing to say to them.’

Again, the others in the cave saying, “You say it’s wonderful out there in your world of colors and depth and winds, but is it safe? Will I have a place to live out there?”

In all truth, there are many dangers to leaving the burning building, in leaving our cave. Not everyone will be able to leave, given the frailties of human nature. Leaving to face the light means leaving friends and family.

And, when we return, we are looked at differently—maybe not fully trusted anymore, maybe considered crazy because of the weird ideas we've suddenly begun ranting about.

A nice little Jewish carpenter left his chains in the cave and explored the light, and when he returned, he had a dickens of a time trying to talk about what he saw. No one could understand what he meant. He tried parables, but people usually took them so literally that the meaning was lost. People either thought he was mad or that he was a god.

If we follow Plato's cave story completely, we realize that the one who leaves the cave cannot bring light back with him to light the cave. He doesn't pick up a torch from a fire outside and carry it back in. If he could, he would no doubt start a panic. And staring a panic among chained people can lead to their insanity.

No, no light can be brought in. Those who will seek this reality must first unlock their chains, get up, and walk toward the light. They must walk unforced. They must want to see. To force a cave dweller into the light would, no doubt, result in terror, confusion, certainly anything but enlightenment.

Plato has his cave dweller leave the cave, but he then returns. He must return.

Man needs those shadows as much as he needs the light.

In the shadows he can SENSE reality. He can imagine what these reflected images may mean.

He can think about their significance to him as they represent reality, without being blinded by more light than he can handle.

As the significance of these images grows in his mind, the cave dweller can safely move a little closer to the mouth of the cave.

For those who never leave the cave, the dangers are everywhere as well.

He who sits chained may delude himself that these shadows ARE reality.

He will believe that it is that dim reflected light which much be worshipped, having no idea at all that beyond that grey bit of color lies more—a BLAZING light beyond his imagining.

But, there are also the ones who escape the caves who will quickly fall into the same trap of believing that the sun he feels is the ultimate—the REAL truth—not knowing there is a UNIVERSE of stars full of brightness beyond that tiny sun.

As Unitarians, of course, we all have, at one time or another, used our key and unlocked our chains. We've gotten up and stretched and taken a few steps to look out the open mouth of the cave. It was wonderful—those first scary stretches, those first steps.

We said, “What if Christ isn’t God?” And we took a step.

“What if these dogma don’t make any sense?” And we took another step.

“What if we just scrap that Trinity idea completely?”

And, soon, we ran into other people like us, and called ourselves Unitarians. It was so wonderful finding other people walking around free inside the cave. So, we all gathered together to talk and we drifted into another room of the cave, and sat down and faced another wall. We talked about why we became Unitarians and we talked about how wonderful it was to find others like us.

The room and the wall are closer to the cave entrance, but it’s still dark in here. There are still shadows everywhere.

We Unitarians of the world said,

“What if we start our own church, where we can meet and be supportive of ourselves and find a sanctuary from the born-again world?”

“What if we change the words to the hymns so they make more sense to us?”

“What if we teach our children to think for themselves?”

That small room in the large cave is very very important. It’s a base. It’s a place where we can return after a long day of working our way toward the light. It gives all of us a sense of community, a sense of belonging.

But, it’s not the light. It’s not the end of our exploring.

There’s still so much further to walk down that dark corridor before we even get to the mouth of the cave.

What if it’s time to use those keys again and stand up and stretch and take a few more tentative steps toward that light?

What if there’s more to this being human sensation than we’ve explored?

What if we don’t even begin to know what we can do?

Here’s a story about hidden potential. It’s the story about an eagle and a tortoise.

“Now consider the tortoise and the eagle.

The tortoise is a ground-living creature. It is impossible to live nearer the ground without being under it. Its horizons are a few inches away. It has about as good a turn of speed as you need to hunt down a lettuce. It has survived while the rest of evolution flowed past it by being, on the whole, no threat to anyone and too much trouble to eat.

And then there is the eagle. A creature of the air and high places, whose horizons go all the way to the edge of the world. Eyesight keen enough to spot the rustle of some small and squeaky creature half a mile away. All power, all control. Lightning death on wings. Talons and claws enough to make a meal of anything smaller than it is and at least take a hurried snack out of anything bigger.

And yet, the eagle will sit for hours on the crag and survey the kingdoms of the world until it spots a distant movement and then it will focus, focus, focus, on the small shell wobbling among the bushes down there on the desert. And it will leap...

And a minute later, the tortoise finds the world dropping away from it. And it sees the world for the first time, no longer one inch from the ground, but five hundred feet above it, and it thinks: what a great friend I have in the eagle.

And then, the eagle lets go.

And almost always the tortoise plunges to its death. Everyone knows why the tortoise does this. Gravity is a habit that is hard to shake off. No one knows why the eagle does this. There's good eating on a tortoise but, considering the effort involved, there's much better eating on practically anything else. It's simply the delight of eagles to torment tortoises.

But, of course, what the eagle does not realize, is that it is participating in a very crude form of natural selection.

One day a tortoise will realize it knows how to fly."

I began this talk confessing my love of science fiction, so it's only right that I end it in science fiction. Maybe this will sort of bring Plato's Cave into the space age.

I am a Star Trek fan. Like, who isn't? And, more especially, Star Trek, The Next Generation. Every episode of every Star Trek from time immemorial has opened with the words saying that the quest of the Starship Enterprise is to "Go where no man (later changed to one one) has gone before." This is the line that sets every Trekkie's arm hairs atingle.

Gives us all goose bumps.

In the final episode of the Next Generation, the very last scene is on the deck of the Starship Enterprise. Jean Luke Picard—the noble Star Fleet captain—is talking to Q.

Q is a sort of god-like character that appeared from time to time in this series. He assumes human appearance, but he is immortal, from a race of immortals. Of course, they consider themselves vastly superior to mankind. And Q feels this superiority most of all.

Q has always been a nemesis to the crew and to mankind in general, sitting in judgment of his puny efforts at nobility. But, he's been one of my favorite characters.

At any rate, in the last episode, in the last scene, they are trying to summarize the whole feeling of the series. Q turns to Jean Luke and says, "Your goal should never have been to go where no one has gone before. You had it all wrong. Your proper goal should have been to explore the limitless possibilities of existence."

As we go out and continue our never-ending walk toward the light at the mouth of this cave we're in, let us also attempt to explore the limitless possibilities of existence.