Interview with Gene Roddenberry: Writer, Producer, Philosopher, Humanist

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Interview conducted by David Alexander

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Gene Roddenberry is one of the most influential yet unheralded humanists of the twentieth century. His two most famous creations, Star Trek and its successor Star Trek: The Next Generation, are solidly based upon humanistic principles and ideas. His creations have moved, inspired and sparked the imaginations of millions of people around the world. The basic massage of both Star Trek and Star Trek: The Next Generation is that human beings are capable of solving their own problems rationally and that, through critical thinking and cooperative effort, humanity will progress and evolve.

Gene Roddenberry was born in El Paso, Texas, in 1921 and was raised in Los Angeles. He studied police science courses in college, learned to fly and volunteered for service in the Army Air Corps during World War II. He flew nearly a hundred combat missions and sorties and was decorated with both the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal. After the war, he worked as a pilot for Pan American World Airways out of New York and Miami, later as a police officer in Los Angeles when he began selling scripts to the fledgling television industry. He resigned from the police department to pursue his writing.

The first pilot for Star Trek was rejected by NBC network executives. With changes in the unprecedented second pilot, the show was accepted and ran on the network from 1966 to 1969 for a total of 79 episodes. In the fall of 1969, the show began syndicated distribution — and the rest, as they say, is history. Star Trek has run continuously in at least 150 markets in the United States, as well as dozens of foreign countries. This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the most successful television series in history. In September 1987, Star Trek: The Next Generation debuted. Now, over 80 episodes later, it has surpassed in longevity the original series. The Next Generation has already won three Emmy Awards as well as the 1987 Peabody Award for "best of the best".

Gene Roddenberry has been a member of the American Humanist Association since 1986. On May 10, 1991, at its fiftieth annual conference in Chicago, the AHA will present Roddenberry with its Humanist Arts Award in recognition of his distinguished contributions to humanism and humanist thought.

Gene was interviewed over the course of several months at his homes in La Costa and Bel Air and at his office at Paramount Studios.

Alexander: You wrote more scripts than any other writer for one of my favorite shows, Have Gun, Will Travel.

Roddenberry: Yes, that was a fun show to do. Paladin, the main character, was something of a science-fiction character. I didn’t realize it at the time, but he did science-fiction things.

Alexander: Paladin was the knight errant who had his own set of ethics and convictions.

Roddenberry: Yes, he did. It might have been fun if we had had Paladin comment on the existence of a god.

Alexander: That brings us to your philosophy. How did you come to your basic humanist stance?

Roddenberry: My family was from the South. My mother was very religious. Every Sunday we went to church — Baptist church. I didn’t really take religion that seriously. It was obvious to me, almost from the first, that there were certain things that needed explaining and thinking on, but why bother about them? I was a child. Life was interesting and pleasant.

I think the first time I really became aware of religion — other than the little things you do as a child because Mom says to do it (it was mostly Mom) — was when I went to church. In my early teens I decided to listen to the sermon. I guess I was around 14 and emerging as a personality. I never really paid much attention to the sermon before. I was more interested in the deacon’s daughter and what we might be doing between services.

I listened to the sermon, and I remember complete astonishment because what they were talking about were...
things that were just crazy. It was communion time, where you eat this wafer and are supposed to be eating the body of Christ and drinking his blood. My first impression was, "This is a bunch of cannibals they've put me down among!"

For some time, I puzzled over this and puzzled over why they were saying these things, because the connection between what they were saying and reality was very tenuous. How the hell did Jesus become something to be eaten?

I guess from that time it was clear to me that religion was largely nonsense — largely magical, superstitious things. In my own teen life, I just couldn't see any point in adopting something based on magic, which was obviously phony and superstitious.

I don't remember ever being serious about any of those things. When I sang in the choir, we made up cowboy words to the choir songs. The rest of the choir would be singing "Holy, Holy Jesus", and we would be singing something entirely different. At five years old I was serious about Santa Claus, but at five and a half I learned it was nonsense. Writers often write these as weighty moments, but in my experience they're not. Santa Claus doesn't exist. Yes, I think back now that there were all sorts of reasons he could not exist and maybe have a little sadness that he is gone, but then I think the same thing about Jesus and the church.

Alexander: If God exists and he, she, it, or them created this vast and wondrous universe, we certainly trivialize the concept of God, by, as Alexander King once said, talking about this anthropomorphic deity having nothing better to do than throw banana peels in front of us as we walk down the path of life. We are such an egocentric species. If God created this big universe, does he have nothing better to do than go to this little tiny speck and mess with our lives? Are we that important?

Roddenberry: And then the God you consider in your teenage years is the guy who knows you masturbate. This has tormented so many people.

Alexander: God as the ultimate voyeur.

Roddenberry: So my thinking about religion sort of stultified at that time and I just decided not to pay any attention to it. I stopped going to church as soon as it became possible for me to do things on my own as a teenager. I made up my mind that church, and probably largely the Bible, was not for me. I did not go back to even thinking much about it for years. If people need religion, ignore them and maybe they will ignore you and you can go on with your life.

It wasn't until I was beginning to do Star Trek that the subject of religion arose again. What brought it up was that people were saying that I would have to have a chaplain on board the Enterprise. I replied, "No, we don't!". I think I learned somewhere in those years what many humanists learn: that if you argue with those types of people, they will ensnare you.

Alexander: Sort of like a tar baby. Once you become involved in arguing with them, you cannot get rid of them.

Roddenberry: Yes. So I would just nod sagely and pretend to go along with them, and I would keep my own thoughts. When I began doing Star Trek, it became almost impossible to stick with my own thoughts because here we were dealing with a series based both on reality and on a starship.

Presumably, each one of the worlds we were dealing with was very much like Earth in that several religions must have arisen over time. Contending religions. How could you have a chaplain if you've got that many people of different and alien beliefs on your ship? With as many planets as we were visiting, every person on the ship would have to be a chaplain!

Alexander: Was there a lot of pressure on you or the networks to include a chaplain? Did this pressure come and go?

Roddenberry: It came and went because I think that the people of intelligence realized it was an impossible situation to rationalize. A couple of times we had a prayer or a ceremony when someone got married. I remember a few years ago when, in one of the films, we killed Mr. Spock temporary. I had a great problem with the writers and producers because they wanted to do, well, really, a Christian funeral ceremony for him.

Alexander: For a character who was a Vulcan?

Roddenberry: Yes, for a Vulcan. I said that it was ridiculous. I kept running into problems like that until I said that I was past the time of rationalizing all of this and I've got to be practical about these beliefs because I am dealing with them on a day-to-day basis. I think it was the growing up of Gene Roddenberry in his fiftieth year.

Alexander: You identify yourself philosophically as a humanist?

Roddenberry: Yes.

Alexander: You were raised in a situation that would seem to preclude you from being a humanist.

Roddenberry: There's really no clear-cut, definitive reason I am a humanist except that I am an enormous reader and student and humanism seems to be the logical outcome of all that reading and study.

Alexander: I find it fascinating that in your teens you started paying attention to what the preachers were saying in their sermons. You just rejected it out of hand as being nonsense. You weren't involved in a long philosophical journey. You simply looked at it from a commonsense standpoint, thought it was silly, and dropped it. That was the end of it.

Roddenberry: Yes. They said God was on high and he controlled the world and therefore we must pray against
The half-felt compliment, the little white lie.

Roddenberry: Yes. I know that, had we been a family of education and college graduates, I would have had a different idea. I had learned to protect my privacy and keep my thoughts to myself until I was well into my second year of college. I had, to that point, never found any reason for being otherwise. Why should I publish my thoughts? Each thought, admitted and published, deprived you of certain options in life. So, better keep them silent unless you were faced with something you could not keep silent about — causing someone to be wrongfully convicted of a crime or something like that. You can get by in life by pretending that those things just don’t exist. Ignore them. During much of my life, I did.

Alexander: No sense in being honest until you have the ability to make that honesty work. Or to express your opinions.

Roddenberry: Or to make it pay. I had plenty of guidance in the ethics of expediency because you can hardly live through the day with adults without seeing their efforts at expediency. You face it all day long.

Alexander: The half-felt compliment, the little white lie.
Roddenberry: The little white lie. "Oh, I’m sorry, Martha. We didn’t think of calling you because we were so busy." In fact, you probably can’t find a person who’s not affected by expediency.

Alexander: That brings up a character on the current series: Counselor Deanna Troi’s mother, a Betazoid telepath, played by your wife, Majel Barrett. Mrs. Troi says exactly what she thinks whenever she thinks it. Human beings have some difficulty dealing with her.

Roddenberry: Yes. I may write some of these things as an effort to forgive myself. [Laughter.]

Alexander: It almost seems Machiavellian that you put your wife in that role. I’m not going to get into that.

Roddenberry: [Laughter.] Yes, I don’t think I’ll comment on it either.

Alexander: There is an object lesson there in that Mrs. Troi is a very difficult person to deal with because she is blunt in her honesty without any of the little tacit conventions that humans have amongst themselves to blunt that much severe honesty.

Roddenberry: And she belongs to a society where everyone else reads everyone’s thoughts, so they can’t be dishonest.

Alexander: I wonder how long a human would last on their planet?

Roddenberry: Not long.

Alexander: Star Trek: The Next Generation is probably the most humanistic entertainment program that is on television — or perhaps, ever has been on television. One of the underlying messages of both series is that human beings can, with critical thinking, solve the problems that are facing them without any outside or supernatural help. I was especially impressed with the episode, "Who Watches the Watchers?"

A Federation anthropological field team is observing a medieval culture on a planet that had, hundreds of years before, dropped all supernatural beliefs. Captain Picray observes that this was a magnificent accomplishment. Then some technology fails and the observers are themselves observed. The story line resolves around some of the natives’ desire to return to the religion of their forebears since it explained, simply, the existence of the alien observers. One of the subthemes throughout the episode was how easy it was for some people to attribute the unexplained events to supernatural causes instead of thinking things through. Picard spends a great deal of time convincing a native leader that he is a mortal like her and not a supreme being.

Roddenberry: I’ve always thought that, if we don’t have supernatural explanations for all the things we might not understand right away, this is the way we would be, like the people on that planet. I was born into a supernatural world in which all my people — my family — usually said, "That is because God willed it," or gave other supernatural explanations for whatever happened. When you confront those statements on their own, they just don’t make sense. They are clearly wrong. You need a certain amount of proof to accept anything, and that proof was not forthcoming to support those statements.

A great deal of my early training was due to my father who, mysteriously, never showed up in church. I can remember now what things he had to say. He did not think the church was particularly the guidance that he would have pushed me to have. He felt that it was good for me to go to church, but he damned careful of what the preachers say. [Laughter.] He was caught in two life modes.

My mother, I would volunteer, was the angel in my life. She took us to church every Sunday, but my father didn’t go. He just avoided church. He would mumble things like, "If you had some of the experiences I’ve had with these people and how phony they are..." There was a preacher now and then that he liked as a human being, but he didn’t care much for most of them. I don’t think he ever took us to church except for maybe the odd evening ceremony or some special reason.

One time he went and wished he hadn’t. It was 1933 when the great earthquake hit Long Beach. We had some relatives come into town, and Dad did the decent thing and took them to church. My Dad was much like many humanists I’ve known: kind-hearted. He never called anyone on a religious question and never made a big thing about the fact that he was not religious. I remember when I was about three years old I learned to recite a poem. I think it was "Away in a Manger". I had been called up onstage at church to perform it. I was a little ham — maybe I still am — but I remember the applause being so good. When my father came into the church a bit later, the preacher said, "You’ve got to see this", and he invited me up to the platform again and I repeated the poem.

My father suffered fools gladly. I would not cast those other people as fools, but my father suffered people’s prejudices gladly, happily.

Mom had a hell of a time explaining why my dad never showed up in church. It was the things you might expect of a loving wife — "He works hard. He sees so much of this during his working life, he doesn’t care to talk about it afterward", et cetera.

Alexander: What was your father’s background?

Roddenberry: He left school in the third grade. Later on he taught himself to read and write. He was a very intelligent man. He learned much like I learned. He met people and fastened on to what they were saying. My father was a very common man who got his high-school diploma while he was a police officer in Los Angeles. He was very pleased with that.

I received a letter which told me a great deal about him.
Two elderly ladies wrote from Jacksonville, Florida, when the original series was on NBC. They had watched Star Trek, saw my name, and wrote that they could have predicted that I would have done something like Star Trek because I have talked of such futuristic things when they had met me on my way to Europe to fight in World War I. They thought they had discovered my father and what he was doing long after he came back from the Great War. They thought I was my father. That told me quite a bit. They had remembered him all those years and said some very nice things about him.

Alexander: That must have been exciting to have received that letter.

Roddenberry: Yes, it was. To have them say about my father that he held such thoughts when they knew him was exciting. There are many things about fathers and sons and you tend to think about the bad things. But in this case it was good stuff. It made me proud that, in spite of being not formally educated, he had dreamed such dreams.

Roddenberry: I’d like to say a few more things about him to set my mind straight. He was advanced far beyond his time. Once he took me out to the front yard of our Monte Vista Street house and said, ”Gene, some day they’ll rip out whole blocks of the city and put gigantic highways through here.” He was talking about the freeways that I later saw being built. He said this to me in the 1930s.

During World War II, while I was visiting home, Dad had shown me a newspaper report on how the Germans had broken through the Russian lines. Dad was looking it over and said, ”I’ve spent some time in open country, and I know something about the military. I figure they’ll be stopped about here.” He was pointing at Stalingrad.

He was a shrewd analyst of world events. I am reminded now that, being in my teens or early twenties and very knowledgeable, I pooh-poohed his decisions and observations, but they were well ahead our military men.

Alexander: He was a basic Los Angeles street cop?

Roddenberry: Yes, he was a good beat cop. I think my father was very often embarrassed with what the police did in those days. He was an unusual man. I guess many of my beliefs about ordinary people and what they can do come out of respect for my father. He had a side to him that we as different, quiet. He had an ugly side, too, but it was, I think, legitimate for him at that time, as I know how he grew up in the Florida-Georgia backcountry.

Alexander: Your dad seemed to have escaped a lot of the normally accepted social conventions and beliefs he was exposed to. Obviously your father was the major influence in your life.

Roddenberry: Much more than I realized. As these interviews have proceeded, I have realized how much influence my father had. He was a difficult man and he had many areas of…well, he was not formally educated.

I remember things he did when I was in grade school. I had written in a spelling test the word whales for the country Wales. My teacher corrected my paper and wrote, ”Whale is a mammal!”. Dad saw that and said, ”What kind of teachers are they giving you? A whale is a fish!” He was going to go to the school and talk to the principal.

Alexander: Did your father come home and tell you stories about police work or did he keep that to himself?

Roddenberry: He was rather quiet about work. We knew he was a policeman. We knew a man had attacked him with a gun once. We knew the bullet had creased his skin and uniform, but he never talked about it much. He was never a macho police officer. He was more interested in the types of things we talked about — how would the city change. He was a very thoughtful man.

Alexander: When did he die?

Roddenberry: In December of 1969.

Alexander: Perhaps it is not until we are in our forties or fifties that we can really appreciate our parents. By then, for many of us, it is too late.

Roddenberry: Yes, I have so many questions I would like to ask him if he were alive today. I have so different an attitude toward the rights and wrongs of his decisions. He very often said things about religion that wounded my mother in the early days. Later on, he didn’t wound her anymore because, as she grew, she understood that praying to Jesus doesn’t solve problems.

Alexander: Did this affect your siblings?

Roddenberry: Yes, my brother and sister are nonreligious. In fact the whole family is. You don’t see religious stuff in my family when you are around them. This, in a family that 15 years before had Tuesday prayer meetings in the house. Mom began that in her early twenties and just drifted out of it in the later years. My mother is still living and a pretty shrewd poker player — as my driver, Ernie, will acknowledge.

Alexander: I see poker occasionally brought up on both the original and current series. I believe there is a weekly poker game on the Enterprise in the current series.

Roddenberry: I agree with Somerset Maugham, who considered poker a test of person’s intelligence and decency.

Alexander: Do you play often?

Roddenberry: We play every two or three weeks.

Alexander: Does it cost you, or do you walk away with money?

Roddenberry: I usually win or break even, but I have a long attendance record.
life of poker. My brother and I learned arithmetic with cards. We learned to calculate with cards, particularly cribbage: 15-2, 15-3, and so on. Playing cards was very much a part of our family, part of growing up and learning process.

Alexander: It is serendipitous that we are talking about family in this part of the interview, having just watched "The Next Generation episode "Family", which is emotionally very powerful. The necessary healing that Captain Picard has to go through after his personal invasion by the alien Borgs and the interaction with his older brother was well dramatized. That is another hallmark of Star Trek — the very human qualities of the characters.

Roddenberry: Yes. This is a compliment. To do a science fiction series and have the characters come anywhere near human is an accomplishment.

Alexander: Some have described you as a modern Jonathan Swift. Would you explain that?

Roddenberry: I always enjoyed Jonathan Swift, the lands he went to and the characters he invented. It always seemed to me that the type of writing I was doing was like what Swift did.

Swift used his characters to point out stupidities in our own systems of thinking. When you see the Lilliputians fighting and double-crossing each other, you are watching humanity through Swift's eyes. I've been sure from the first that the job of Star Trek was to use drama and adventure as a way of portraying humanity in its various guises and beliefs. The result was that Star Trek — in the original series but even more powerfully in the second series — is an expression of my own beliefs using my characters to act out human problems and equations.


Roddenberry: Yes, possibly. It is difficult for a writer not to do that because, well, what else is there to write about? Basically, the things you write about are your own beliefs. It is difficult for almost anything I write not to be Roddenberry: on Life.

Alexander: You came very close to getting out of television. You were very successful before Star Trek, but you were unhappy. Before Star Trek came along, you were about ready to pack it in if you couldn't do what you wanted to do because of…?

Roddenberry: Censorship! Because of the fact that writers and producers are more or less expected, on network television, to perpetuate all of the modern myths: the male is vigorous, battle is the true test of a man (that was particularly so in Westerns), and stereotypes about men and women. If you don't write them, people will stare at you askance and wonder, "What is he writing about?" It is only quite recently that we have had thoughtful writing about reality on television. Twenty-five years ago, and longer, it was next to impossible because first there were Westerns and then there were cop shows... Yes, I was just about to pack it in because there was no way I could write the things that were on my mind.

Alexander: Do you recall any examples of censorship from the early days?

Roddenberry: Censorship traveled a wide path. There was censorship about areas of skin that were left open. If a girl was in a light blouse and her nipples raised and showed through the blouse, you had to have band-aids over the nipples. You could not have visible nipples. How much skin was permitted to show used to be almost a matter of geometry and measurement. I remember doing shows that showed the inside of a woman's leg. Those shows were turned down because, for some reason, the inside of the leg was considered vulgar.

Alexander: The inside of the leg was considered vulgar, but the outside of that same portion of the upper leg was okay?

Roddenberry: Yes, it was okay. If you are cursed with a somewhat logical mind, you ask questions about those things. Eventually, what you learn to do is automatically censor yourself. You tell your actors, "Whatever you do, don't open-mouth kiss". You know the things that will be censored, and, since all of that costs film, time, and energy, you get to a situation like I had on Star Trek, where I had to put in certain things because they were important to the stories I was doing. This is particularly ---- in the current series.

Alexander: Such as television's first interracial kiss in the original series?

Roddenberry: I never considered it a big thing. As a matter of fact, long before Captain Kirk kissed Lieutenant Uhura [Nichelle Nichols], I kissed her many times. [Laughter.] Captain Kirk and Lieutenant Uhura's kiss was an integral part of the story line, and it never occurred to me to question whether Kirk should kiss a black person or not. I had, by that time, achieved as certain clarity about those things.

Alexander: Before the original series, you were considering leaving television. If you walked away, what were you going to do?

Roddenberry: Well, it goes back to a statement my grandmother made to me many years ago: "Keep pure, keep your heads up, keep listening, and something will come along that you can do." She told me that one of the tricks of life was to keep pure. By that she meant keep true to your own beliefs. There are always opportunities. I would hate to think that, if I hadn't done Star Trek, I wouldn't have found something else that meant just as much to me.

Alexander: Now that you are doing a syndicated program instead of a network show, do you have greater freedom to say what you want to say? Is there more or less censorship on television now?
Roddenberry: The areas to be censored vary as time goes on. The censorship we had in the early days was related to skin and kisses and the like. That level of censorship would not be acceptable today because audiences are becoming more educated. However, the truly serious things that we can be censored about are criticism about the military-industrial complex and advertising. You have to tread very carefully around advertising because it uses television to whet appetites and sell products. You've got to be careful about that.

Alexander: Corporate interests?

Roddenberry: Corporate interests, the possibility that Russia might be a little bit right in some things it does. You could almost gauge those things by the blood pressure an imaginary character would have if you did them. That's part of my comment about honesty, too. You cannot write television and be a completely honest person. I'm a little more honest now with Star Trek: The Next Generation, but even then I am not honest because there are many things that are not yet permitted to be discussed.

Alexander: Sexual attitudes?

Roddenberry: Sexual attitudes is one subject.

Alexander: Certain political ideas?

Roddenberry: Certain political ideas, yes. There are just any numbers of things which you don't talk about on television today.

Alexander: Even 25 years after the original series?

Roddenberry: Yes. Less things now, certainly, but powerful things you don't talk about.

Alexander: I read your observation about what television is — to sell products.

Roddenberry: Yes. Unfortunately also to sell ideas — like that America is pure and decent and the rest of the world, depending on its relative darkness, is less so. There are two giant waves that are going on. There is the wave of the things which control television and make a lot of money, but there is also the wave of intelligence. It is said that we double our knowledge every seven years. If you take the time this phenomenon has been going on, we have quintupled our knowledge since the early days of television. Our knowledge has grown enormously, and the television audience's knowledge, even an untutored audience, has been growing. There is a limit to how much of a smoke screen you can throw up. There is a limit to what the audience will accept willingly.

Alexander: A case could be made that 20 years of the original series being on television, being syndicated all over the world and being seen over and over again, has had a good effect on the populace.

Roddenberry: Yes, I think it has. There are certain words that I used in the first shows some 25 years ago, certain ideas that have grown in popularity since that time — ideas that were a part of Star Trek.

Alexander: Are there any subjects that you haven't tackled on The Next Generation that you would like to?

Roddenberry: There are subjects, yes, but I will keep them secret, because you have to wait until a certain level of thinking permits these things to be thought about openly and in writing. I have many thoughts which, if I were to voice them now, would turn many people against me. People would think, "My God, behind this is such inequity!"

[Laughter.]

Alexander: People would be surprised at how big a revolutionary you really are? [Laughter.]

Roddenberry: Yes. [Laughter.] So I don't care to go into that.

Alexander: Paramount has given you a free hand to do what you want?

Roddenberry: Yes, they have. It was hard to write the first Star Trek and insist that I was a totally honest person, because you can't write the things I was forced to write in the first Star Trek and be a totally honest person. I had the honesty not to deal in violence — or at least not overt violence — where violence was an issue. A lot of the things I wrote — the way I dressed my women and used their bodies to advantage and so on — in that way the original Star Trek was an honest show but far from being really honest.

Alexander: It was an exceptionally advanced program for its day.

Roddenberry: Yes, I guess it was, which delights me when I think about it.

Alexander: We could actually say revolutionary for its day.

Roddenberry: I guess it was, although I wasn't really aware of it being revolutionary when we started. I just thought the things we were writing about were obvious things to write about when you are writing about ships visiting other planets and civilizations.

Alexander: The original series was adult science fiction, something that had not been done on television up to that time. With syndication, Star Trek turned into a phenomenon. Of course, no one sits down to write a phenomenon, but the original series was quite revolutionary in its time.

Roddenberry: Yes, but I did not recognize how revolutionary it was at the time I was doing it. I thought the excitement was about the good drama. I was not aware that the things we were writing about were so different to the average person.

Alexander: You had equality among the sexes and races
with black, Asian and female officers on the bridge. In the
time frame that the series was set — the twenty third
century — these things were taken as normal and
unremarkable, but it was all quite advanced for mid-
twentieth century television.

Roddenberry: Yes. For example, I tend to think in the future
it won’t seem at all strange that women are treated as the
equals of men. I remember when NBC said to me, "How
many women do you have on the ship?" They thought that
we certainly couldn’t have a ship’s complement that was
half men and half women. NBC commented that I should
consider the amount of hanky-panky that would be going on
if the ship were equally divided among the sexes. We
argued, and finally I agreed with NBC that I would make the
ship one-third women — thinking to myself, with a chuckle,
that one-third of a crew complement of healthy women
could certainly handle the men anyway.

It did not seem strange to me that I would use different
races on the ship. Perhaps I received too good an
education in the 1930s schools I went to, because I knew
what proportion of people and races the world population
consisted of. I had been in the Air Force and had traveled to
foreign countries. Obviously, these people handled
themselves mentally as well as everyone else.

I guess I owe a great part of this to my parents. They never
taught me that one race or color was at all superior. I
remember in school seeking out Chinese students and
Mexican students because the idea of different cultures
fascinated me. So, having not been taught that there is a
pecking order people, a superiority of race or culture, it was
natural that my writing went that way.

Alexander: Was there some pressure on you from the
network to make Star Trek "white people in space"?

Roddenberry: Yes, there was, but not terrible pressure.
Comments like, "C'mon, you're certainly not going to have
blacks and whites working together ". That sort of thing. I
said that if we don’t have blacks and whites working
together by the time our civilization catches up to the time
frame the series were set in, there won’t be any people. I
guess my argument was so sensible it stopped even the
zealots.

In the first show, my wife, Majel Barrett, was cast as the
second-in-command of the Enterprise. The network killed
that. The network brass of the time could not handle a
woman being second-in-command of a spaceship. In those
days, it was such a monstrous thought to so many people, I
realized that I had to get rid of her character or else I
wouldn’t get my series on the air. In the years since I have
concentrated on reality and equality and we’ve managed to
get that message out.

Alexander: Reality was seemingly caught up with Star Trek.
We have women airline pilots regularly flying for major
airlines, the number-one cadet at one of the military
academies is a woman, and I am sure we will see a female
ship’s captain in the U.S. Navy soon.

Roddenberry: I believe there is at least one woman of
captain’s rank, but she is not commanding a ship. Yes, it’s
all happening. Those things strike me as so logical.

When Paramount originally approached me to do a new
series, I turned them down. I did not want to devote the
tremendous amount of time necessary to producing another
show. In order to keep the original series going I practically
had to disown my daughters. I had no time for them when
they were school age. I did not want to do that to my life
again. There is only one way I know to write and produce
and that is to throw my energy at the project all the time.

So, when they began to think about a second series, I said I
would not do it. Then they said, "Well, suppose we figure a
way that it could be done so you would be in charge". I
thought they were kidding. The studio said that I should be
in full control of the creative standard. I asked a few
questions, and they said, "Yeah, sure, you must know these
things because you’ve been doing them anyway under
networking guidance."

Alexander: Did they know what they were getting into when
they let you loose?

Roddenberry: I think so. It would be fun to pretend that the
world is made up of brave, good writers and stingy
businessmen and studio executives. The truth is, in our
somewhat remarkable country, sometimes businessmen
are as bold as writers.

Alexander: You’ve had a good relationship with Paramount?

Roddenberry: The late relationship has been wonderful.
They even agree that they are making considerable money,
and they are paying some of it out.

Alexander: That’s nice to hear. So, there was a conscious
decision to go with syndication rather than try to sell the
show to a network?

Roddenberry: I told the studio that if they went the
syndication route I would go for it. Not only would I go for it,
I would go for it full blast. I told them I would find ways of
doing Star Trek that would give them extra elements. I think
we have done that.

Alexander: There are a number of new things that you
undoubtedly wanted to say and, with the freedom of
syndication, you can. Let’s talk about the new program. I
like the new series better than the original series, even
though I liked the original series quite a bit.

Roddenberry: I do in retrospect, but I am not the same man
who was in charge of the old show. I have matured — or I
like to think I have matured a great deal in the years since
the first series.

Alexander: Clearly, you are producing the show that you
want to produce. You have a free hand. Of course, you
have grown in the 20 to 25 years since Star Trek first
Roddenberry: Yes, if there is one thought that gives me some joy here in my late sixties is that I have grown and continue to grow. I am very glad I went the direction I went.

Alexander: How is the Gene Roddenberry of today different compared to the Gene Roddenberry of 20 to 25 years ago?

Roddenberry: He's a more educated man. There is a great deal of education in what I do. There are magazines and books that I read regularly and a process of education that I dearly hope will continue. I like me now, which is a change from my mid-thirties and forties.

Alexander: What do you attribute that change to?

Roddenberry: I think it is ridding my mind of a lot of foolish passions; accepting myself as I am. I find that I am growing and hope I will continue in that process. Not being so sure of everything and having an open curiosity is also important. I think I have, for example, a political philosophy now, but I have no guarantee that it won't change or, more correctly, evolve further. I don't think it's going to change markedly, but I am capable of changing as I learn more about the world and myself.

Once I was very difficult to deal with. In my early years, I had set up the things a person must do to be a "proper person." That became a problem for my later years. I have discovered that we're all proper people and that we're all very capable of error. At one time, I was very strict with my friends and associates and now I work at giving them the same affection I give myself. I guess in my majority years, somewhere along the line, I must have said to myself: "Hey, you're not a bad person. Yes, you make mistakes, but you constantly strive to overcome that and to repair them. I've noticed, Gene, that as the years go by you've changed your points of view on things, which I like to see in a human and in a humanist." I think I try to continuously perfect myself without any hope of reaching ultimate perfection. It is a marvelous journey.

Alexander: Let's talk about your political philosophy.

Roddenberry: It would have to be similar to the philosophy of Star Trek because Star Trek is my statement to the world. Understand that Star Trek is more than just my political philosophy. It is my social philosophy, my racial philosophy, my overview on life and the human condition. I have been able to comment on so many different facets of humanity because both Star Trek and Star Trek: The Next Generation have been so wide-ranging in the subjects they've covered.

My philosophy about the use of animals has changed. I am not yet a vegetarian, but I don't feel comfortable as a meat eater knowing a lot of the things that go on to put meat on the table.

Alexander: I remember the character of Commander Riker on the current series commenting on how it was no longer necessary for animals to be raised for food. Twenty-fourth century technology could create an analog of meat so that all the things associated with bringing meat to the table were no longer necessary.

Roddenberry: I look forward to that day coming. We would have our juicy T-bone steak without having to kill the animal. I feel different way about domestic animals now. I am a bit queasy about the way we raise our chickens and beef cattle and so on. It's really ugly.

Alexander: You're talking about factory farms?

Roddenberry: Yes, it is just not a good thing. I also look forward to when we will contact other races and other life forms. What will our attitude be toward them? If we are not careful, we may see sentient life that is so different we won't realize it is sentient. Because the creatures we meet don't act and interact as we do, we might consider them valuable — much as many people disdain dolphins and whales today.

Alexander: I was just thinking that we are not particularly good with the other sentient beings on our own planet.

Roddenberry: On the hand, we are making marvelous progress. We humans are really growing rapidly now. It is largely a product of television and communications. Our attitudes are changing with remarkable speed. I am glad to be in drama, because I think that I, along with other writers, can make great changes in our world because of the power of sound and image that is often as real to people as their own lives.

Alexander: You made a statement about 15 years ago: "I think television is one of the most dangerous forces in our lives today." Do you think that situation has changed?

Roddenberry: Certainly there is a great deal of danger from anything as powerful as television; its imagery can affect us with such power. But it's no more dangerous, in its own way, than a car is over a horse and a wagon. I think now that I was saying, "Let's be careful of it". In the hands of a Hitler, yes, television could change and turn society backwards.

Alexander: Of late, the headlines have been saying that the networks have been losing audience share. We have cable networks and shortly we will have direct satellite-to-home broadcasting. Do you think in five or ten years there will still be a place for the networks?

Roddenberry: There will be a place for them, but they will be just a part of the broad spectrum of communications. The world of three networks carrying the most important messages is long gone. One method of broadcasting — syndication — is so much better than networks! Syndication allows you control of your program. The evolution of programming is changing rapidly.

When you deal with networks, you deal with a lot of people who do not have the experience to make the decisions they
Roddenberry: A fellow from demographics came to NBC and said, "Congratulations, you've just got rid of your most important and successful program." They did not know what he was talking about. Star Trek had a low rating, and they didn't understand what he meant. Part of this attitude is my hoping for a better Gene Roddenberry. It is very easy to nod and agree that money is the bottom line, but really it's not. I have no objection to that.

Alexander: Well, really you're not a bottom-line-type person. What do you think about the rest of contemporary television?

Roddenberry: Give or take the multiple channels we are exposed to — in Los Angeles we have almost 50 channels — some of it is bound to be pretty bad. There just isn't too much creative thought available. Give or take that, I think the level of television is better than it ever has been. I suspect that, if we watched some of those shows from the early days of television now, they would be sort of dull. Overall, I think television has improved.

Alexander: Let's go back to the original series. Seventy-nine episodes over nearly three years, and then NBC decides to pull the plug. Someone mentioned to me that a demographer had a talk with the network brass after Star Trek had been cancelled. Tell us that story.

Roddenberry: Yes, the bottom line, except that...yes, it is the bottom line, but it isn't my bottom line or the bottom line of the people I respect. Sometimes you agree with "bottom-line statements", but actually you don't. You think, "I'm a little better than that". Part of this attitude is my hoping for a better Gene Roddenberry. It is very easy to nod and agree that money is the bottom line, but really it's not. I have no objection to that.

Roddenberry: Yes, and some deserve it, but I suspect that network vice-presidents are no worse than their counterparts at General Motors or ITT. All vice-presidents start from a limited base of information. They are limited by their boards of directors in the choices they can make. I tend to have a broader view now. When people have limited abilities, it is often because of limited input.

Alexander: Paramount has been supportive of you?

Roddenberry: They have been very supportive. I think the answers lie in economics. They'd be silly not to be supportive of me because the things I do make great amounts of money.

Alexander: And, of course, money is the bottom line in Hollywood.

Roddenberry: Yes, only because a nice person called me and told me that I was more important than I knew.

Alexander: That means you asked for more money next time?

Roddenberry: That's true. It is also interesting to note that Star Trek was cancelled three months before the moon landing.

Alexander: I don't want to knock network executives, but they always seem to be the butt of jokes by comedians. Johnny Carson always has great fun with network vice-presidents.

Roddenberry: They have been very supportive. I think the answers lie in economics. They'd be silly not to be supportive of me because the things I do make great amounts of money.

Alexander: You have talked about television being a cooperative team effort in creating shows.

Roddenberry: Yes. There are two sides to that. It is a cooperative effort. The show we make now is the result of several writers, directors, and story analysts. It is a cooperative venture. At the same time, cutting through it another way, it is a single creative artist's show. In other words, I had to set the character of the show before all of this began. There is no consensus option except what the show's creator permits to filter into his brain. It is a strange combination of many cooperative individuals. I am so thankful those people are there, but I am also thankful that they didn't interfere with me when I was thinking it out.

Alexander: You're not going to let anyone do something that's not Star Trek.

Roddenberry: Yes, those are my famous words: "Who knows what 'Star Trek' is? I do!" Then, given that, the marvelous team that is making "The Next Generation" is another level of cooperation. These people are in every aspect of Star Trek — props, music, and so on. I don't know as much as any of them about their individual areas of expertise. They're such clever people. Once they're all proceeding from the original idea, the original feeling, then it is a genuinely cooperative endeavor. Unfortunately, at
present, language has not been invented that allows such an endeavor to be described as both a one-man operation and a multiple-person operation at the same time.

Alexander: An interesting limitation on our language as the show is both, simultaneously. The current series is well into its fourth season. Will it go a fifth season, maybe a sixth?

Roddenberry: Yes, until it becomes uneconomical to produce. You can only rerun so many shows so often. The show is popular and growing in popularity.

Alexander: Another good example of your humanistic philosophy on the program is the episode "Justice" from the first season of the current series. The scantily clad love-making race, the Edo, is observed and protected by its orbiting 'god', an advanced race or being that is only dimly perceived. At the conclusion of the episode, I recall turning to my wife and commenting that that was the most anti-religious and humanistic television program I had seen in years.

Roddenberry: At the end of the episode, the "away team" is blocked from beaming back to the Enterprise by the Edo's "god". Picard revolves the story's conflict by saying, "I don't know how to communicate this, or if it is possible, but the question of justice has greatly concerned me lately. I now have something to say that I think is important! I put it to any creature listening that there can be no justice so long as laws are absolute. Life itself is an exercise in exceptions." Riker then quickly says, "Bravo. When has justice been as a simple as a rule book?" The superior being evidently agrees, and the Enterprise crew is permitted to beam up.

Alexander: I was stunned at the presentation of such humanistic ideas. What kind of mail did you get on that episode?

Roddenberry: Not a great deal. People get caught up in shows and really don't think in terms of philosophies. They are concerned that the beginning, middle, and end hang together. Is it sensible? This episode was. It was all patently sensible. It is a source of considerable amusement to me that we do shows like this, and on various other subjects large and small, and get little or no public reaction. If these things were to be done on Broadway or in motion pictures, they would have stunned audiences. The audiences would have said, "How wild, how forward, how advanced". But because these subjects are done on a syndicated television show, in our time slot, no one really notices them.

I thought several times that the world of drama would have stood up and cheered us, but no, only silence. But there is one advantage, one thing happening: all of these episodes are brought back and rerun every year. What will happen with Star Trek: The Next Generation is almost identical to what happened to the original Star Trek as larger and larger audiences become acquainted with the program. The original Star Trek audience now says, "Hurrah, what fine shows!" This has brought us considerable pleasure that they would notice it. Star Trek: The Next Generation is on that same path now and even more so. The time will come when the second series will attain its true stature. I just hope some of it happens while I am still alive. I'm not jealous that I don't have the praise. This happens very broadly in contacts with humans. The world is not necessarily poorer because a painter or a playwright is not recognized in his or her lifetime.

Alexander: I am reminded of John Dewey's observation, how he characterized his approach: that it was a long, ongoing process of education.

Roddenberry: Yes. Also, the world is not necessarily poorer because there are certain limits to what you can do. I could not have done many of the subjects we cover on The Next Generation on the original Star Trek. As people have gotten wiser, more latitude on subjects is permitted without great surprise. What I have done will encourage young writers coming along to take the next step in all these areas. Perhaps they will do it so well that they'll one day say, "Who did Gene Roddenberry; think he was? He was nothing compared to Johnny Smith" or whoever.

Alexander: One of the things you have been complimented on is that you have encouraged young writers and have gone out of your way to pull them in.

Roddenberry: They are very precious to me.

Alexander: As you have said, it comes down to writing. Without good writing, there isn't good television. And there aren't that many good writers to go around.

Roddenberry: No, there aren't. For some reason, I am reminded that we had a writer, Ted Sturgeon, who started doing some television work. Up until then, he had always been a writer of great novels. Someone said to him, "Ted, I understand that you are doing Star Trek now. Don't you know that 90% of everything on television is crap?" Ted rose up grandly and said, "Ninety percent of everything everywhere is crap".

Alexander: That certainly could be applied to television. We can name just a handful of programs that have consistently high quality scripts, acting, directing and production — Hill Street Blues, M*A*S*H*, St. Elsewhere, L.A. Law, Equal Justice. Not a lot of other names come to mind.

Roddenberry: There are some — Cheers, for example. Every season, one or two, sometimes, come along.

Alexander: It always goes back to the writers, though.

Roddenberry: Yes, in the purest sense, but you would be better in saying the creative elements of the show. How can you separate working producer from writer or writers and the other creative elements, which, in some cases, may be producers who guide writers into writing those kind of scripts. An annoyance I've had with the Writer's Guild is when they talk about the "purity" of writers, but when I am the executive producer, who happened to create the show, somehow I'm not a writer.
Alexander: I'll toss out another subject you may have some thoughts on: the religious right and fundamentalism.

Roddenberry: There will always be the fundamentalism and the religious right, but I think there has been too much of it. I keep hoping that it is temporary foolishness. Some of it will always be around because there will always be people who are so mean-spirited and such limited thinkers that their religious beliefs seem so logical — that there is a god, and so forth — that nothing else in their limited concept can explain what the existence of a god can. There's been a lot of it lately — Youth for Christ and that sort of thing. I'm hoping that this is just a bump in time.

Of course, the only thing that will keep such things from continuing and growing is education. Dewey was right about that. Unless we have an educated populace, there's no telling what may come along. The pressures of life are so great that a certain percentage of all these uneducated people will come up with strange ideas. Strange, violent ideas. They seem to have good answers for all of our problems. I don't think life's problems are such that we have to rely on simplistic answers instead of thinking things through. I think these things will be found in proportion to and in reverse order of how well we educate --- populace.

Alexander: We even had one science-fiction writer start his own religion.

Roddenberry: Yes, good old L. Ron Hubard. For me science fiction is a way of thinking, a way of logic that bypasses a lot of nonsense. It allows people to look directly at important subjects. This is what we do a lot on Star Trek: The Next Generation.

Alexander: You basically redefined the science fiction genre in the first series, putting adult science fiction on television. It was good fiction about people — drama with a futuristic setting.

Roddenberry: Actually, Star Trek was not about science fiction. Star Trek was about people. I think this is the main reason the program was so successful. What is more interesting than people?

Alexander: Who are some of the early writers you remember influencing you?

Roddenberry: We did not have a circle of friends in which I ever heard said, until later in life, anything about writers. Writers were Zane Gray and the like. I sort of grew into the things that I later began to read. It wasn't a case of us having a circle of friends and a family who talked about great books. Books were wonderful enough. Perhaps just by beginning to read you wander through the right books.

When I was a young man, there was no television, and I used to go to the library once a week. I used to check out three to five books a week. I remember riding on the W-Line streetcar to the library and home again. I remember getting some peanut butter and crackers and falling into the dream world of books. My mother used to ask me if I was going to read every book in the library. I only wish I had been able to!

I have had a lifetime of reading. This has, perhaps, left me with some residual wisdom — wisdom enough not to overvalue myself or overcompliment myself. I'm willing to take the bows for thing I happen to do well, as I suppose a violinist would in his or her field. I consider that this is the process of what sentient individuals do constantly throughout their lives.

Alexander: You are now willing to identify yourself as a writer and a philosopher.

Roddenberry: This has happened just in the last few years. It was almost as if philosopher were too grand a title to lay on myself. Only recently have I felt comfortable in saying that I am a philosopher...never saying I was a good philosopher! [Laughter.]

Alexander: I would say a successful one at that.

Roddenberry: Yes, a successful one.

Alexander: It's almost like calling yourself a philosopher puts you on a different plane. I don't think we would find too many people who would argue that you aren't a philosopher.

Roddenberry: The kind of shows I've written kept me in philosophy — and particularly the most recent project, the last four years of Star Trek: The Next Generation. You might say that this is the first time I've been really philosophically open about my beliefs.

Alexander: You've said that the studio will continue to produce The Next Generation as long as it makes money.

Roddenberry: Yes, as long as it makes money. And to make money, it has to have general audience approval. Should I start venting my feelings on God, religion, and so on, to the point that it becomes hurtful of people and of their feelings, I would not be doing a good job.

Alexander: Both your feet seem firmly planted on the ground, and you have resisted any temptation to be "preachy" on the show.

Roddenberry: Because I would not be doing a good job there either.

Alexander: The show, the product is your first responsibility.

Roddenberry: For several reasons. The main reason is that people must watch the product and be enthusiastic about it for me to get my message across. If my product was not successful, I would not have been able to do some of the scripts you have admired. The reason I can do them is because the numbers — ratings — are right. I think, in my own defense, that I also make the numbers right by doing the program well.
Alexander: And you don’t beat us over the head with your message.

Roddenberry: I think that everybody who is capable of understanding my points understands them. Would I like to be able to say, “Screw censorship” and “Screw making the show successful” and just say what I really feel; Yeah, I would. But it’s something that would not be in the best interests of the show, and I think I would rapidly lose my audience.

Alexander: But if you could, would the show be dramatically different from what it is right now?

Roddenberry: Oh, yes, I’d do stories you just couldn’t approach right now.

Alexander: But would you still draw the audience?

Roddenberry: No.

Alexander: So you would have all these great points and no one watching. What are you doing now is obviously the way to go.

Roddenberry: It’s the only way to go. The only way to do otherwise is to enter another market like books or something where you’re happy for a small audience. You can’t do that in television and be successful.

Alexander: That’s true. It’s a medium for a mass audience — a mass medium to sell stuff.

Roddenberry: Yes. It works out pretty well. I think sometimes the very fact of there being limitations on what you can do forces you into being more creative.

Alexander: To get your message across is a more clever way...

Roddenberry: Yes, a much more dramatic way.

Alexander: You are wildly idolized by huge numbers of fans and yet have managed to keep a very level head and a solid view of yourself and your life. What do you suppose came out of?

Roddenberry: Strangely enough, a lot came out of dealing with the two sides of my personality — my public and private personas. I know very well the public person I am presenting. I know what the rules are, what the limits are and I know that as that person gets better and better known, I can push a little further. Also, I am still the basically honest person who thinks to himself, “Don’t touch that with a ten-foot pole. It’s right, yes, it’s right. But you wouldn’t want to tell even your wife what your thoughts are on that. Et cetera, et cetera.” That guy is still here, too.

I also try to remember what success is and what it amounts to. I don’t think, for a moment, that I am the grand knight in shining armor, forever courageous. I’ve seen my moments of cowardice and my moments of confusion. I keep trying to improve those situations, but I don’t allow myself to be swept away because I would be swept away by a lie. I allow myself to forgive myself and like myself even though I lie. I keep hoping and working for a better Gene Roddenberry.

Alexander: The first duty of humanists is to be honest with themselves and to accept their humanity, with all of the little warts and wrinkles.

Roddenberry: Yes. I think the warts and wrinkles can be beautiful. They can be the test of whether or not you are a true human. Are you capable of those errors and capable of those foolish little angers that cause you to say foolish little things? To be a human, although you are not perfect, to be guided to accepting yourself, is a great pleasure. You can take great joy from it.

Alexander: You’re still a very private person.

Roddenberry: Yes, a very private person. Yes. That’s why I’m able to manage this person who I present to the world: because I understand those limitations.

Alexander: So essentially we have two Gene Roddenberrys: the public persona and the private person. The private person lets the public person out and pushes him a little bit further whenever possible.

Roddenberry: Yes, in a carefully regulated way. Let him be pushed a little further as success grows, but don’t push him too far because it can all come crashing down.

Alexander: Was there any time when you thought that perhaps during the first series you had pushed a little too far?

Roddenberry: Oh, yeah. But not a lot of times. I’m — for want of a better word — crafty. I’m more likely to push too far — to push a little bit over the edge to see if it works — than not.

Alexander: You haven’t had your fingers singed too often?

Roddenberry: Not too often, no.

Alexander: You can usually tell when it’s coming?

Roddenberry: Yes. And it comes with not so much force that you can’t get out of it by craft.

Alexander: When that comes, is that something from an executive, a writer, the mail?

Roddenberry: It might come from anywhere — a newspaper even. It might be from an executive. It might come from your fellows, your friends — ”Come on, Rod, you really don’t believe that, do you?” And I listen.

Alexander: You pay a lot of attention to friends and...

Roddenberry: To all sort of reflections, yes.
Alexander: Women and men?

Roddenberry: Male and female. I have an active love of females. Coming from a time and place where you were heavily criticized if you showed much affection for female philosophy, I think I’ve done very well. I’m still hoping to improve on that.

Alexander: Do you consider yourself a feminist?

Roddenberry: I really do, although I know many people who would laugh at that. Maybe I consider myself a feminist; maybe the inner person is still being careful of that at times. I’ve got a secretary who certainly doesn’t consider me a feminist. She criticizes me very often, and I listen to her.

Alexander: Back in the mid-1960s, you were talking about things that you considered obvious: full equality among -- sexes on board the Enterprise, for example.

Roddenberry: As my wife often says laughingly, "That’s what he publishes! But let him get full equality at home and you’d see a different Gene Roddenberry". [Laughter.]

Alexander: You are a child of the 1930s. Just a few days ago you had your sixty-ninth birthday and, yet, what you are doing is selling something that is totally futuristic. One almost thinks this is something that should be done by younger man, someone in his twenties. But it isn’t; it’s being done by someone who is approaching his seventh decade. Yet, and pardon me the ageism here, you don’t seem like someone who is 69 years old.

Roddenberry: Apparently, what you are referring to is that, when I analyze a thing, if it’s hogwash, I say "Hogwash!" and move on to something else. A lot of---are paddling on hogwash. I remember the church-going days, usually Sunday, when people mouthed hogwash all evening long and no one said, "Hey, wait a minute, how does that add to that?" And you hear the same thing when you hear religion today being talked about by preachers. You act like what I say is unusual. I relate it to what is being said and whether or not it is believable. That’s one of the strong story points that I teach writers: are the story points connected and believable? If not, get rid of them.

Alexander: The believability factor has always been the hallmark of Star Trek.

Roddenberry: Within limits.

Alexander: Within limits, of course. There is the science-fiction element to the stories, but the believability of the characters has always been paramount.

Roddenberry: Yes, I think that’s very important in Star Trek. Do the characters go from A to B to C in a logical, believable manner? I hate to continue to say logical, as that calls up Spock. But I’ve always thought a thing must be basically logical to believe it — if you are to count on it, bank on it for a character.

Roddenberry: Male and female. I have an active love of females. Coming from a time and place where you were heavily criticized if you showed much affection for female philosophy, I think I’ve done very well. I’m still hoping to improve on that.

Alexander: This is kind of “fannish”, but, in the two series, do you have a favorite character? I know there are parts of Gene Roddenberry in all of the characters, but is there something in one or two of the characters that is more “you” than others?

Roddenberry: At various times, I have a romantic touch with every character. I fall in love with them for awhile. But the ones that I have the greatest affection for are Spock and, in the new series, Data. But, as I turn from that, can I say Worf, the Klingon, has become a favorite? There are certain brave and bold things he believes in. I say, "Golly, that’s good for a person to be like that, even though it’s a little foolish". And I mustn’t forget McCoy, whom I made the voice of humanity. I have very found thoughts for him. Kirk was the complete airline pilot. You know, you never doubt, when you’re flying with Kirk, that you’re going to get down one way or another.

I guess if I were God these would all be favorite humans of mine. I would say, "Yeah, isn’t that character wonderful, but this character is also wonderful in what he believes and where he takes it from there." Writing, in a strange way, is like having the best of all worlds. You do become God. I guess that is part of the pleasure and joy in writing.

Alexander: Over the years, you have a lot of pressure brought on you by various factors — both public and private — to change things on both series, to say things that you do not particularly want to say. How do you handle that sort of thing?

Roddenberry: Well, there are several ways. The easiest I have found is just to put it aside and wait until I have a chance to think clearly and speak clearly on it. Other ways often defeat you. We’re all prisoners of this little, intimate world we inhabit. Life is not an easy game. That sounds trite. You enter into life with a lot of personal desires, personal needs. The mind, being what it is, converts these to decent things, and you really don’t have the opportunity to analyze all of them in the hurry of life. The best you can do is stand by certain things that sound fundamental to you, but you can be tricked even by that. I think a little sanity in this world is a triumph.

Alexander: You worked for the Los Angeles Police Department from 1949 to 1956. You went from patrolman to sergeant. That was in the days when Bill Parker had just come on as chief and things were still kind of wild and woolly in Los Angeles. Talk a little about that experience and how it affected your life and how it may have shaped your philosophy.

Roddenberry: I was Parker’s speechwriter, writing his philosophical beliefs. I had to justify for him many of the things he did. These were things of rare honesty. I was close to him in the days when he dreamed of building a better police department and when he was engaged in putting his dreams into action. We exchanged a lot of confidences as our relationship went beyond that of a chief of police and none of his sergeants. He used me as a philosophical sounding board, and I used him the same
way. Our relationship was such that we were capable of
intimate thought and philosophical exchanges. After he and
I left the department and went our separate ways, it was
difficult to maintain that former closeness. Some time later, I
learned he was giving a speech and I slipped into the back
of the audience to hear him. After the speech, he saw me,
came up, and gripped my arm in a gesture of friendship. A
week later he died.

Alexander: He was the archetypal incorruptible cop who is
credited with bringing the LAPD into the modern era.

Roddenberry: He was, yes. The only thing that ever
corrupted him was that mysterious thing of believing in
something so strongly you believe what you said. He had
the strength to do that. He was an honest cop. I wrote some
good speeches for him. It’s as close as I’ve come to writing
pure philosophy.

Alexander: There were a couple of times, perhaps more
than that, when you couldn’t write for Parker.

Roddenberry: Well, those were clear choices for me. Most
of my writing for him, of course, were things I could espouse
and agree with. Parker thought police work should be done
with great sympathy for the criminal, even when the criminal
was wrong. It was only in the cases when Parker loaded up
against the criminal and began to say that there were
certain criminals you shouldn’t treat with any fairness at all
that I refused to go along with him. There were only a few
instances when that happened.

In the early years when I was working for him, I was pretty
much my own master. He encouraged me to think out
certain subjects. Parker, by my rights, was a philosopher. It
was only when he forgot he was a philosopher and began to
think he was God that he got into trouble. As his student, I
have gotten into trouble the same way.

It is rare that a person can be everything you want them to
be. At various moments, all of us are capable of depth of
soul and profound honesty. Many people who only knew
Parker in his later years don’t believe he was capable of
that sort of self-examination and deep philosophical
expression.

Alexander: You once said to me that, while writing for
Parker, you had come to the conclusion that the solution to
the drug problem was legalization, or perhaps not
legalization, but decriminalization, making drugs a public
health-medical problem. Have you changed your mind on
that?

Roddenberry: If anything, I believe that even more firmly as
time has gone on. I think the current drug czar [William
Bennett at the time of this interview] is a foolish man and
will accomplish nothing. When people have a need — a
physical need — people are going to have drugs if at all
possible. For some people, it is very upsetting, demanding
need. I certainly believe that people who believe otherwise
— that with mortality you can toss drugs to the side — are
wrong. I’ve come close enough to feelings where I could
have been an addict to believe that I am forever strong. I
hope so now; but forever — who knows?

Alexander: There is a big movement in this country to
enforce the Puritan ethic by fiat of law.

Roddenberry: In this country, we tend to believe that law
can accomplish nothing. When people have a need — a
Bennett at the time of this interview] is a foolish man and
time has gone on. I think the current drug czar [William
Roddenberry: If anything, I believe that even more firmly as
heard on television and read by newspapers is part of what a
writer puts in and
takes out at the end of each episode. In many shows, he hardly
was involved in a shoot-
out at the end of each episode. In many shows, he hardly
am pleased with the times I didn’t. Violence has always
been a part of American television. It seems to me that it is
so easily arguable that violence is not the key or important
ingredient in television drama.

These are only two subjects in a world of subjects. I
suppose, in the back of my mind, there’s a book showing
other writers that violence and sex are only two of 10,000
subjects.

Alexander: Subjects that people would happily watch and
be interested in.

Roddenberry: Yes. Television got off to a very bad start
regarding violence. They had pretty much unthinking
writers. The Western with the man who was fast with the
gun is a good example. I’ve been puzzled for many years
why people who should know better, including philosophers,
icorporate that in their thinking — that violence is an
answer to many things — because we know in life it isn’t.
Violence begets violence. Everything that is supposedly
wrong with television is part of what a writer puts in and
reaps.

Alexander: Minimalistic violence was often reflected in your
early days as a writer. Paladin, the central character on
Have Gun, Will Travel*, wasn’t always involved in a shoot-
out at the end of each episode. In many shows, he hardly
pulled his gun.

Roddenberry: I was pleased with those scripts. I’m not
pleased with scripts where I fell off the wagon and created a
crafty fast gun who was evil — without questioning very
much why he was evil — and had Paladin slay him. But I
am pleased with the times I didn’t. Violence has always
been a part of American television. It seems to me that it is
so easily arguable that violence is not the key or important
ingredient in television drama.
Alexander: On Star Trek people think their way out of problems.

Roddenberry: More so on Star Trek: The Next Generation, which is the product of my mature thought and having achieved a majority of years. I used to think that Star Trek was very good about being nonviolent, but still there are episodes that I rushed over. Kirk would pick up the challenge of another race a little too fast for my comfort. I made quite a change in attitude and direction of the show when I did The Next Generation, because the new captain is not apt to do those things.

Alexander: Was there a demand by the networks for more action when you were doing the original series?

Roddenberry: No. It was part of the education of Gene Roddenberry:. There was always a demand that there be action. Perhaps with a lack of experience I interpreted those demands that they be the type of action I ultimately wrote. But later I learned and developed from myself that there are all sorts of action that demand a fight to the death and that sort of thing. You can also say that a trial to the death is an excellent avenue for drama if it is laid out properly.

In the pilot for The Next Generation there was a trial to the death by the character Q, who pointed out the millions of deaths that have been caused by humans. Q charged a group of four people that he had captured with the responsibility for humanity’s history of violence. If you have a case of two men drawing their weapons against each other — or a situation in which someone is likely to be killed — that is the wrong kind of action. We can find our action in all sorts of arguments and dangers that don’t involve death.

Alexander: Certainly, Captain Picard is more philosophical than Captain Kirk. For Picard it is always: stop, think, talk, and reason one’s way out of a problem.

Roddenberry: The character was drawn that way, but I don’t criticize the actors or the people who did the original series. As I said, that was part of the growth of Gene Roddenberry:.

Alexander: I would say, from your time as a policeman, you saw violence in the street and saw what it really does to people. Most Americans, unless they have been through military combat or have worked as police officers, firefighters, or paramedics, have no idea what real violence is and what a gunshot or a knife wound really does to someone. They see sanitized violence on television with very little blood and no one getting sick. Would you care to comment on this?

Roddenberry: Yes, I think we sanitize violence and escape any real feeling about what it really is. Television violence has no agony in it — or anything else, for that matter. People who are shot clutch their breast with a brave little smile and die…but off-camera. Violence is an ugly thing. When it is done, it should be done for the sake of the ugliness so that you are saying to the audience, "This is a terrible thing, even the hero is doing an ugly thing". There should be a comment on that ugliness.

Alexander: Sex is often equated with violence.

Roddenberry: You can easily feel when you are watching television that someone has said, "Hey, this is not exciting enough. We ought to have a little sex here." And sure enough, they put it in, and often it is thinly disguised as action. Writers create and perpetuate this simplistic approach to drama because these are simple answers to boredom.

Alexander: Jonathan Frakes’s character on the current series, Commander William Riker, is sexually active. There have been several episodes in which he has had affairs with different women. At one point in the story line, Riker had a relationship with one of the other regular characters, Counselor Deanna Troi, before the current narrative began. Yes, none of this seems to be out of place; it all seems to be a natural part of his character.

Roddenberry: Making the show, we never felt that sex is wrong, just as we never felt that violence, at times when it becomes necessary and there is no escape from it, it is wrong. I think what we try to do in Number One’s place is to lead a very exciting real life. You and I don’t complain if a friend of ours is involved in sexual escapades. I think Star Trek: The Next Generation is, among other things, a fairly grown-up series. Perhaps that helps us.

Alexander: Star Trek is not and never has been a children’s show, and yet there is a huge following of children. Why should we encourage children to watch it?

Roddenberry: Because what we try to do in fiction is to present people of all ages with many aspects of life. In a way, this trains them and prepares them for the multiple choices and decisions they have to make during their own lives. The more young people see honest shows, the better choices and decisions they have to make during their own lives. The more young people see honest shows, the better they’re prepared. I can’t imagine making television for almost any other reason except preparing people for life’s travails and excitements. Isn’t that what television should always be, what storytelling should always be. I can’t imagine making television for what she has said about Star Trek’s effect on her fulfills my dream of what television should always be, what storytelling should always be. I can’t imagine making television for television and drama than to show the various problems you will face as a human, with all the temptations one way or another. Hopefully, you will find a resolution, unexpected or not, that allows people to benefit from the drama they see. Whoopi is, to my mind, a splendid sample of making use of drama in your life: isolating the decisions you are likely to face, having put it firmly in your mind that, if the dramatized
I immediately pulled back to my first bulwark of argument and said, "Yes, but you are a well-known actress capable of playing a lead in the show, and we have a bunch of working actors already cast. We have a person in every category we need." I was trying to be polite, because I thought highly of her. She said, "No, you don’t get it, do you? What I am saying is that I love Star Trek. It’s been close to my mind all my adult life, and I want to play a part in it, even if I just run a bar." This is the character I later suggested to her.

She is a marvelous woman. She said, "I don’t want to be a star of the show. I don’t want to deprive anyone of their job." She then explained why she liked the show and said, "I just want to be a part of what this is doing for people." She had been affected by the original series and she understood perhaps more than many, what drama could do to people and that the drama that was being played out on Star Trek was important.

Alexander: She had been shown by Nichelle Nichols’s character, Lieutenant Uhura, that black people could do anything and, as she said to me, there would be black people in the future. So, now Whoopi’s character, Guinan, runs the ship’s lounge, Ten Forward, listens to people, and offers sage advice. I believe she is named after the famous New York bar owners, Texas Guinan.

Roddenberry: Not many people know the origin of her character’s name. Guinan is a great character, and it is tremendous what Whoopi adds to the show. Whoopi’s own wisdom fits her character, which is a character with centuries of experience. She fits it so well.

Alexander: Except for her age, Whoopi is playing herself on the show.

Roddenberry: She is, really.

Alexander: This is where the real payoff is — when people like that come in, out of the blue, and say, "Listen, this isn’t another job for me. That is something I believe in, something I want to be a part of. I want to be here. I want to be doing this."

Roddenberry: "... Regardless of my reputation, I want to fit into your needs and what you can afford to do."

Alexander: This has probably caused her problems in the rest of her career if she is committed to your for certain times.

Roddenberry: Yes, but at the same time she is doing what she wants to do, and no one is badly harmed by that.

Alexander: You cast both series?

Roddenberry: Yes, and I think it is pretty clear now that the shows are well cast. This is the result of considerable research on my part and listening to wise people such as Bob Justman, who recommended that I look at Patrick Stewart to play Captain Picard.

My way of casting is different. Actors come prepared to answer the questions they are typically asked at casting calls. Suddenly, with me, they find themselves discussing topsoil and a whole range of subjects that have nothing to do with being cast. The reason for this questioning is that I am interested in getting a feel for them as people. The way I cast is to try to learn who this actor, this person, really is. I try to find out if they fit in with my idea of the character. The answer to that may come out of anything they say — a reminiscence of their childhood, for example. I don’t want a centered, structured casting interview. I am casting the actors as people. The preliminary work has all been done, and all the normal, regular casting questions have been asked and answered well before the actors are standing in front of me. What I want to know is: who is this soul I am dealing with?

Alexander: Let’s talk about changes in making a series.

Roddenberry: Yes. The changes that happened to the power structure. I’ve never been in the position I am now, so naturally it’s new to me. To have total acceptance of the Star Trek idea by the studio … it is a lovely position of power and opportunity that comes when you’re accepted. Very few people have gotten into this position.

Alexander: Basically, they leave you alone. Is that it?

Roddenberry: Yes, they leave me alone, but it wasn’t always so. When we were first talking about the new show and would I consent to do it, it wasn’t as it is now. Much of what is now grew out of those days, grew out of decisions that I made. Rick Berman can tell you marvelous stories about the first year of Star Trek: The Next Generation when I had some studio junior executive troop into my office and pull out a script and say, “All right now, on page one there is this comment,” et cetera. Rick remembers very well that on that day I shut these guys up forever by telling them that they did not have the right, under our contract, to come in and talk to me about the script, what to change or what to do. I backed it up with quotes from out meetings.

Rick was stunned that I could do this, as he had once been one such executive and had a sense of their power. When I laid out that they had no power and no right to waste my time with anything — and I did it with strong words — he was stunned. That was the end of that with those guys.
Alexander: Too bad we couldn’t have had the encounter on videotape.

Roddenberry: [Laughter.] I didn’t realize that it was going to happen until they brought out their scripts and started to thumb their copies. I realized I had to stop it then and there.

Alexander: I’m sure that when the story got around there were any number of independent producers making a small toast to Gene Roddenberry! I think the studio executives realize that you are a professional person who produces a good, saleable product. You have a solid track record in the original series.

Roddenberry: Yes, I do feel that’s part of what I do, what I’m hired to do — bring certain qualities to producing the show. I don’t know that anyone else has ever tried that. Rod Serling may have come close at one time with his Twilight Zone, but I don’t think as close as I’ve come.

Alexander: You were producing the original series for, what was it, $180,000 an episode? This was $20,000 an episode less than Mission: Impossible, and you had more special effects, more costumes, more stuff to get in than Mission did.

Roddenberry: And more of a commitment of what I would do. I would do a certain amount of action and adventure in each episode. The network was always complaining that every other show should be a planet show when they found we had been shooting every other show as a shipboard show. They were upset over that. We had great arguments over than, much of which was put in comments and memos. There are no arguments now.

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Alexander: This current series is one of the most expensive, if not the most expensive, series going.

Roddenberry: Oh, yes, very much so.

Alexander: $1.3 million per episode?

Roddenberry: And more, sometimes.

Alexander: I heard Patrick Stewart say in a radio interview that every time he pulled the trigger of a phaser it was $1,000. Don’t shoot too much — it’s too expensive!

Roddenberry: The studio has said little about that. When they have complained about the show being over budget, I’ve been able to say, “Yes, but last week’s show was so many thousands of dollars below budget.” We haven’t had a great deal of complaints about budget. I think now, with this fourth year going one, we go occasionally over budget, but this has evened out in the past and probably will this year.

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Alexander: This is always, of course, with the idea that the series is making money. Since this is a bottom-line-driven business, a program can be as creative and well produced as possible, but if it is not financially successful, they may love you but you’re gone.

Roddenberry: Yes, and I would be gone, too. It’s kind of exciting because that pressure adds a dimension that art seldom has. It must turn a profit.

Alexander: I don’t see anything wrong with the word commercial. That’s how it is. You are able to gather a large audience of people in a certain demographic group because this large group of people wants to see what Gene Roddenberry creates.

Roddenberry: And they will pay to see it. It will be interesting to compare this present situation, which is really a lovefest compared to most, with what will eventually happen when The Next Generation begins to lose ratings, lose points, which it inevitably will.

Alexander: Well, you’re on your fourth season and the scripts are looking better than ever.

Roddenberry: Yes, they are, but don’t let anyone know that I am doing less and less work on them. [Laughter.]

Alexander: As the cast is signed for six years, theoretically the show could go for six solid years. That would be unusual for modern television. When we were growing up, a series could go for 20 years — Gunsmoke, for example. M*A*S*H. was on for 11 years. That’s almost unheard of now.

Roddenberry: Of course, they didn’t have the substructures of television that they do today. If you could go 20 years and make a profit today, they would do it. The structure now is that six or seven years is the absolute maximum because of the number of prints you’re turning out and reruns.

Roddenberry: Yes, they are, but don’t let anyone know that I am doing less and less work on them. [Laughter.]

Alexander: The studios want to strip the series and resyndicate it.

Roddenberry: Yes, there is a whole economy that makes it sensible to strip a show. [Stripping a show is selling it in a market where it is shown every day. This has already happened in some markets with Star Trek: The Next Generation.]

Alexander: And then, of course, the unique thing about Star Trek is that there is the subculture of fans with the ancillary merchandise that is built in. There isn’t anything that hasn’t been used on the shows that hasn’t been produced and merchandised.
Roddenberry: The amazing part of that is, when Majel first took over Lincoln Enterprises during the first show of the original series, people were saying, "I hear you are putting out scripts and selling them. That isn’t done. It’s impossible to do that."

Everything she tried to do was fought by angry people. "We can’t be responsible for the drawings." "Who will check to make certain things are correct?" Everything we did was criticized, and now it’s part of the business to turn out these ancillary products.

Alexander: You and Majel were pioneers in that sort of merchandising.

Roddenberry: We were. I thought it strange when the studio objected, because these products do, after all, add to the value of the series. How can you object to 20 million grammar school children having pictures of Mr. Spock on their notebooks? Yet, there were strange, powerful objections to us doing that sort of merchandising.

Alexander: This, of course, is from the studio system that threw away three-quarters of Hollywood history when they cleaned out their warehouses.

Roddenberry: This is true.

Alexander: These are the people who would order prop departments to throw away what historians would have grabbed in a minute. If it wasn’t for a small number of people who grabbed this material as it was being thrown away, and in some cases helped themselves to it before it was thrown away, much of this material would not be around.

Roddenberry: As a matter of fact, I helped myself to the trims, the cuttings from the original series. I said to the studio one day, "What are you going to do with that material?" and I was told that several barrels were being tossed out even then. I have an amazing amount of trims.

Alexander: What did you do with them?

Roddenberry: Majel still has barrels of them, owned by Lincoln Enterprises. Five years after the series went off the air, the studio threw out almost everything. Some people went through the garbage cans behind the studio and tried to pull out as much as they could — stills, slides, old costumes, that sort of thing. That’s where fan collecting got started. There are fans out there with original material from the first series — original studio material that was dumped and that they saved by pulling it out of the trash. I held onto whatever I could find.

Alexander: Well, this was just old stuff from a defunct television series that had come and gone. Nobody cared. It was just junk to most people.

Roddenberry: It was almost laughable that anyone would worry about these things.
was a political situation that they felt strongly about.

Alexander: You went along with their recommendations?

Roddenberry: Sure. Additionally, I had insisted that the film be cut in a certain way. They both said, "We can understand your reasoning, but we think it is wrong."

Alexander: That was Berman and Pillar?

Roddenberry: Yes. I argued and argued and finally realized that there was no point pushing it further and asked myself, "After all, is this small point I'm making really worth taking the whole thing to pieces?" I decided it wasn't.

Alexander: We go back to skipping the stair in fourth grade.

Roddenberry: Yes.

Alexander: Of course, on big things you would...

Roddenberry: If they had brought up something that was terribly serious about life or religion or politics, yes, I wouldn't go along with that.

Alexander: Where do you think your philosophy has changed?

Roddenberry: In the early 1960s, I was much more a macho-type person. I was still accepting things from my childhood as necessary and part of reality — how men related to women, et cetera. My assistant, Susan Sackett, used to say to me, "You really put down women a lot for someone who is supposed to be thoughtful and liberal." I began listening to her and agreeing that she was right in her perceptions.

My attitude toward homosexuality has changed. I came to the conclusion that I was wrong. I was never someone who hunted down "fags" as we used to call them on the street. I would, sometimes, say something anti-homosexual off the top of my head because it was thought, in those days, to be funny. I never really deeply believed those comments, but I gave the impression of being thoughtless in these areas. I have, over many years, changed my attitude about gay men and women.

Alexander: Has this come about because you worked with gays in film and television?

Roddenberry: The ones I met and was aware of being gay I got along with because my attitude was, if they were talented, they were talented. Their sexual orientation was not my business or concern.

Alexander: Perhaps this growth is because you have become more secure in yourself as a person.

Roddenberry: I have become more secure. Also, I have thought these things out. I think people might be more open about this and many other subjects if they took the time to think them out. In life, things are going on constantly — people are arguing, disagreeing, and so on; a person seldom gets the opportunity to sort it all out. As a dramatist doing Star Trek, I have had the chance to sort those things out and say to myself, "Jesus, that was a stupid attitude I had about this or that." I think I am entirely without prejudice now. I know of no prejudices, I have now except what may be holdover terminology from my past.

Alexander: We could say that Star Trek was the coming of age of science fiction on television and the coming of age of Gene Roddenberry.

Roddenberry: Oh, yes, definitely. Fortunately, I was in a line of work that allowed this coming of age to happen; I thought things out as I was always dealing with issues. This forced me to change my mind and public attitude about issues.

Alexander: Not only were you paid to think these things through and produce those scripts, but the very attitude that has resulted from that thinking through has become enormously successful.

Roddenberry: Yes. Many people whom I know and, I suppose, who admire me presume that I was always this way. I was not always this thoughtful person who thought things through, who measured everything. I feel that it is a pity that everyone doesn't have some time to spend in drama.

Alexander: The writing process forces you to put your ideas down in concrete form, and then you have to sit there and look at them. Sometimes, they are not particularly pretty.

Roddenberry: Yes, but I had many saving graces, too. I hated animals to be hurt. I did not like violence for violence's sake. I had many female traits, which is certainly a part of any whole man or human. I wasn't part of the crowd that sat around on the sidelines and made fun of people. I always had a great respect for people — even those with different ideas.

Alexander: Let's talk a little about being a celebrity and how one goes about handling that. You don't seem to have a "sense of celebrity", whatever that may be.

Roddenberry: But I can turn it on. If I have a long airline wait or something of that sort, it just makes sense to "celebrity" yourself out of that position. When that happens, people are surprised and shocked, and they sometimes end up doing things for you. You're no different from the person who was sitting there a moment ago, but people want to do things for you. Sometimes it is amazing.

Alexander: In talking about celebrities and the "sense of celebrity", tell us the Sammy Davis, Jr., story.

Roddenberry: Majel and I were waiting at a restaurant here in town. We were waiting for the table we wanted to be cleared, and I looked up and there was Sammy Davis, Jr., leaving the restaurant. I am a great fan of his, and I said to Majel, "I wish I had the nerve to go over and say hello."

When people pull it on me, I don't like it. I wanted to say to
Mr. Davis how much I admired and appreciated him and his work. In the middle of this, Sammy looks up and says, "Gene Roddenberry: Listen, I've been such a fan of yours, you won't believe it." He spent several minutes praising Star Trek, and I was standing there with my mouth open. I wanted to praise him and was afraid to trouble him. He was a beautiful man. What he said was so genuine and his enthusiasm so evident. It was as great as mine for him, but he didn't pay any attention to that. That's my celebrity story.

Alexander: In what ways do you think philosophy is misunderstood by the public?

Roddenberry: Well, there is a public I've received letters from who hate the things I have done. There was one letter I remember. Somebody sent some photographs from a Star Trek magazine to the studio, which has me standing there in front of a naked girl gallantly shielding her pubic area with my hand as she saw someone raise a camera. This girl came to a convention advertising that she would display a costume that she claimed the networks would not allow Gene Roddenberry: to use on the show. She was totally nude. What was particularly risqué was that, in the photograph, my hand appeared to be over her vagina. What you could not tell from the photo was how far away my hand was from her. She was way behind me, and the way the photo was laid out was not an accurate representation of what really happened.

These letters of complaint often refer to some innocuous photograph of some lightly dressed kid who is playing a role and having fun at a convention. The typical letter I receive is something like: "Mr. Roddenberry:, my children were at a Star Trek convention. I had hoped that people like you would be a little more careful about people's sensitivities and feelings. As you can see in this picture, the costumes are scanty" — they are usually girls who are dressed up as "Martian Maidens" or something like that — "and I am surprised you allow that to go on."

I invariably send an answer back saying that I am amazed that the letter writer did not include a complaint about the weaponry many of the other conventioneers were wearing. I list several weapons which were evident at the convention and comment about weapons of death being worse than scantily clad women.

Alexander: Do you think great financial success changed you fundamentally?

Roddenberry: I realize now that I am indeed fortunate with the regular monies which are coming in from the show and from Universal Studio's Star Trek attraction, publishing, plus profits every year, and so on. But it's all happened so gradually that I never said to myself "Aha, you've made it! You have all the money you need." In fact, I was tossing in my sleep last night thinking that there are a lot of people I should thank materially. I have to make sure that I check over my Christmas list this year. I probably can't do it all in one year, but there are a lot of people who deserve to be thanked by me as Americans are traditionally thanked — with cash. Whether or not they are doing their work for that reason, they should be acknowledged.

I've never paid too much attention to money. Not that I consider myself free of greed or anything like that. It's just that I've never been motivated by money. I wouldn't write a script differently if someone said they would give me $20,000 more for good will or whatever. Not that I haven't known tough times. I have been through harsh times. My dreams were going downhill because I could not get work after the original series was cancelled.

Alexander: Was that because you ........ too closely identified with Star Trek?

Roddenberry: Some of it was about that, yes. I remember I was really devoted to the fans at colleges when they voted that they wanted me to come and lecture. I remember one of my first speeches — I got all of $600 or $700, which included the cost of the trip. I felt lucky to net the $400 or $500 that they paid for me.

Alexander: You've also not given a lot of interviews over your life.

Roddenberry: I hope this, doesn't change it, either. (Laughter.)

Alexander: Me, too. Is that for any particular reason? You certainly seem to be a person who has plenty to say.

Roddenberry: Well, I'm not a highly "interviewable" person. Until recently, I wasn't very well known. For me to give an interview on Star Trek was not, for many years, a popular subject. Doing a nifty sci-fi series was hardly something to brag about. I always thought Star Trek was a little more than people assumed it was, but I could go up to my golf club and golf for weeks before anyone would ask me questions about writing.

Alexander: I don't understand that. You create this highly successful program that touched so many people…. I'm sorry, I just don't understand that.

Roddenberry: Well, remember that the popularity of Star Trek has increased phenomenally just over the last few years. I mean to say that it hasn't been on everyone's tongue or consciousness. We who are near show business understand how it happened, but not a lot of other people have really cast it in its proper perspective.

Alexander: Recently, in the comic strip "B.C." there was a sue of Star Trek nomenclature with a funny definition. I think it was "warp speed." We see other phrases from Star Trek used everywhere. Star Trek has entered the popular culture as a part of normal speech.

Roddenberry: Most of the non-science-fiction audience would think those phrases were things that Gene Roddenberry: borrowed from science fiction instead of something I invented.

Alexander: You aren't getting the full credit for the
Alexander: A lot of people have their offices decorated with things that seem worthwhile to me.

Roddenberry: Well, I'm not. I'm delighted to have credit for successful.

Alexander: You're quite self-effacing for someone so successful.

Roddenberry: Yes. Remember Bucky Fuller's great line, "I think I am a verb" Well, Gene Roddenberry: is now a series of adjectives. [Laughter.] There is also the danger in wanting recognition for everything one does.

Roddenberry: Yes. Recognition is the reflection of a real thing. Reflections are not that important in life. If someone credits you properly for a real thing that is of significance and use, yes, that's nice.

Alexander: You're quite self-effacing for someone so successful.

Roddenberry: Well, I'm not. I'm delighted to have credit for things that seem worthwhile to me.

Alexander: A lot of people have their offices decorated with pictures of every celebrity they've ever known and every award they've ever won. Both your home and studio offices have very little of that. You have a few things around — the Peabody Award is on display — but certainly only a small fraction of the things you have been awarded over the years.

Roddenberry: I once had the experience of someone helping me decorate my office. They went out in the garage and got all the awards — large and small — I had received over the years. When they placed them on the walls it looked awful. I believe the first time this was done was in my home, and that's an awful place to carry everything about your work. I didn't particularly like it. It made me seem limited. I would hope that my friends love and respect me for other things. [Laughter.]

There are some things I love. You will see them in my office. There are pictures of the space shuttle, Albert Einstein, and Laurel and Hardy. Those are three things that I think are very important to the world.

Alexander: Let's talk about writing.

Roddenberry: I never led my life with the idea that I was guilty of things to say. I guess, basically, I'm modest. Who am I to tell the world anything? I began writing by realizing that writing is a way of saying things; writing is pap and useless talk unless there is an idea in your script.

Only when I began writing — and writing Star Trek in particular — did I realize how my life experiences had shaped me. I had been fairly careful about saying what shaped me because the legitimate question comes up, "What shaped me for that job?" I had hardly grabbed hold of that until recently with you — that I have something to write about. I am basically a modest man. I have never thought of myself as having broad experience, but you're right. I went through the Depression, bad times in the United States, World War II, police work, airline work, and all this time with a hunger for reading and learning. It is hard for me to sit here and consider that I haven't rather deliberately shaped myself to be a writer.

Alexander: And philosopher.

Roddenberry: And philosopher. I have a terrible hunger for ideas. I've had it since my early years. In my youth, I realized I had this terrible hunger for knowledge — like an addict for knowledge. I remember that I just couldn't sit down without my mind working, without reading something, without accumulating some knowledge, some experience. It seemed that this was more a flaw, this terrible hunger.

Alexander: Your father was the same way, wasn't he?

Roddenberry: He was.

Alexander: Did your father's attitudes also influence your brother and sister? Do they have that consuming hunger for ideas?

Roddenberry: They don't have the hunger for ideas like I do. My sister came closest to it when she was a teenager writing poetry.

Part of it is the family I come from. There was not a hint in my family that we were talking about anything that was recordable — that when we were talking with anyone, with my father, it was worth recording. They were just people. Imperfect people, I think that the Christian ethic of leaning on people's imperfections was some part of it, too.

I remember, for example, saying to my mother one time, "Morn" (I must have been a teenager at the time), "as times I feel sometimes like I could do things and maybe the ideas I have are worth something to somebody." She turned to me with surprising ferocity and said, "no. You're just like anybody else. Don't talk about things like that because it's foolish and nonsense."
She would refuse to accept having me put those words in her mouth now, because we've gone through so many things and I have become the head of the family. Now they sort of listen to what I say as if it were weighty and important. I doubt if it is any more weighty and important than the things I said at 14 [laughter], but now the rest of the world is agreeing with my statement as a 14-year-old.

Alexander: Your mother is outnumbered.

Roddenberry: Mother is outnumbered. She believes in me now. I can call her every few days and joke with her, saying, "Mom, check the Times, or some other magazine, such and such a page, you will see something astounding your son has done."

Alexander: You have been consistent about staying away from God in Star Trek, and, when you do, you approach the subject rather obliquely. The basic outlook of the Enterprise crew seems to be humanistic.

Roddenberry: Oh, yes. They have their own beliefs, which are private to them, and they don't evangelize or go around discussing them with other people. I've always assumed that by this time [the twenty-fourth century] there is a belief that is common to people in Star Trek that, yes, there is something out there. There is, perhaps, something that guides our lives but we don't know what it is and we don't know if it is.

Alexander: I've noticed that absence of evangelicals on the show. Perhaps the real hallmark is that people on the show are civil. There is a tremendous amount of individual respect the characters display for one another's beliefs, even though they may, individually, not like or agree with those beliefs.

Roddenberry: I doubt if there is one belief that unites everybody. I doubt if you can find a belief — other than "mind your own business" — that fills that category. I've never felt the need to write in a character who are evangelical.

Roddenberry: I remember in the original series you had an episode, "The Way to Eden," with the central character played by Skip Homeier. He and his true-believing followers were looking for the mythical planet Eden. The twist was that the planet turned out to be the opposite of what Homeier and his followers believed it would be. It wasn't sweet and wonderful put poisonous and deadly. Homeier's character climbed a tree, ate an "alien fruit", and died instantly. Every time I see that episode, I think "Gene, you devil. Look what you got into that script." Talk about taking the biblical myth and reversing it…"

Roddenberry: I don't remember that particular script, but I'm still proud of it. [Laughter.]

Alexander: You grew into your humanism, just like most of us.

Roddenberry: Yes. I put so much together, subconsciously, that the day came when something forced me to bite the bullet and consider humanism. It was very clear that Alexanders were right. Humanism was right. I've known that for some years. One by one, getting rid of the old conventions and beliefs that nag you — the need to say "God bless you" when someone sneezes, and the like — leads you to humanism. So, yes, it was a gradual process, and I like to think that it is possible to have that gradual, maturing process all through life.

Alexander: Perhaps we could say that, instead of the education of Gene Roddenberry, this is the ongoing maturing of Gene Roddenberry. That's a process. Maturing is more a verb than a destination.

Roddenberry: It is a process — a thinking process, too. Something stimulates a memory, and I react to the recollection. A year ago, I would have concluded such and such. But I have seen myself fooled so many times I'm not going to conclude that this is "the Truth". I'm going to suspect that this is "a truth" — lower case rather than upper case.

Alexander: Yes. Realizing that you may have less than adequate information to make up your mind, you suspend judgment.

Roddenberry: Part of it is the life process in this current age. I receive too much information on too many subjects. If I were to make great decisions on the basis of just the occasional "great decision," my life would be one great decision after another — great understanding after great understanding. But it's not.

Alexander: You live your life as though you have nothing particularly valuable to say. You go about your business doing what you're doing: living your life and producing a good television show.

Roddenberry: And adjusting to these things that give you some understanding. In 70 years time, you make a lot of adjustments.

Alexander: Yes. Some are forced upon you, and others are made willingly.

Roddenberry: Yes. I love the process. I love the process today. I don't want to die, particularly. I'm not afraid of death, but I don't want to die at this time because there is so much being revealed.

Alexander: Life is interesting.

Roddenberry: Yes, very much so.

Alexander: You have finally come to the conclusion that you are as much a philosopher as you are a writer. It has taken you a while to come to that.

Roddenberry: It has taken me a while. I've shied away from people saying I was a philosopher. I've shied away from giving them a hint that that was my belief. Of late, with so
many successes going on, my life has gone well. Things I have declared for have at least appeared to be true. I guess I call them successes. This is shaky ground. This is entrapment, too.. I am a "successful man."

Alexander: Yes. How do we define success? You were successful before you did Star Trek: The Next Generation. The studio enticed you back — not with money but with a television studio to play with and the ability to do and say what you wanted. You couldn’t turn that down.

Roddenberry: No, I couldn’t. I have to make that point in my own defense.

Alexander: It is interesting to see, with all of your success, you take yourself seriously because you are serious about what you do, but you don’t take yourself too seriously. I think, from what I have been able to see, you’re nicely balanced.

Roddenberry: I think I am. I don’t think I am purposely balanced. I think it is just the way I am. I like the idea that I don’t believe that, because Star Trek has a certain rating and a certain number of people in the world talk about it, I am somehow wiser and less capable of error. Good ideas, like good scripts, come out one word at a time.

Alexander: Of course, the minute you start to take yourself too seriously, the audience might be gone.

Roddenberry: Exactly.

Alexander: Star Trek fans have been remarkably loyal over the years.

Roddenberry: Oh, yes. They are lovely group of humans.

Alexander: There is no other show in history that even mildly approaches the — well, I think it is appropriate to use the word — beloved status that the Star Trek programs and the characters have.

Roddenberry: Yes, that is an appropriate word.

Alexander: They are loved as virtually nothing else on television before or since. Perhaps even the word revered could be used to describe some fans’ attitudes.

Roddenberry: Perhaps one reason for that is that I have not taken myself too seriously. Seriously enough, but without the prophecy that “someday it will be recognized as the Truth.” It is just a nice television show produced by a nice guy.

Alexander: You look upon yourself now, more than you did a few years ago, as a nice guy. You’re happier with yourself now than you were; you’re more comfortable with yourself.

Roddenberry: Oh, yes. I’m surprised that anyone who reaches my age is totally sane, because life is often a process of being knocked down and stomped on and laughed at and rejected. I don’t recall not being rejected.

Alexander: You’ve said that it was a tremendous blow when the original series was cancelled. You put your life-blood into that for several years.

Roddenberry: That’s true, but I recall being rejected for other things besides Star Trek. I think there was some writing about this by a psychologist who said that rejection is the normal way for people.

Alexander: You view rejection as a natural and normal part of life?

Roddenberry: Yes. Part of life’s contest.

Alexander: We can’t learn anything from constant success, can we?

Roddenberry: No, we can’t. One thing I’m a little afraid of is that I don’t have constant rejection now. There are people who are beginning to look at me a little differently. As I pass, a sort of hushed reverence emanates from their direction.

Alexander: Have they started to genuflect?

Roddenberry: No, they haven’t, thank God.

Alexander: Well, if they do, we’ll get out a little collection plate and pass it around.

Roddenberry: [Laughter.] We’ll make it one way or another.

Alexander: The First Church of Roddenberry:, Scientist.

Roddenberry: Yes. The very fact that you say that means that other people have said that, too.

Alexander: What a thought!… the humanist attitude toward sex is basically minding one’s own business. Certainly, the Star Trek attitude is of people minding their own business. We don’t see moralizing and moral outrage on the program.

Roddenberry: None that I am aware of.

Alexander: Can you synopsize your philosophy?

Roddenberry: That’s like saying to someone, "We want you to end this book in the next five pages." The wise old man says, “If I had 500 pages, I could.” I think my philosophy is based upon the great affection I have for the human creature. I mean a tremendous affection.

Alexander: Yet, humans are capable of incredible cruelty to one another. Taking the long view of history, do you think we have to go through a certain amount of craziness and barbarism to become a mature species?

Roddenberry: Of course we do. We are children who toppled into this world, the result of pushing and shoving and cruelty and joy and all of these things. Here we’ve fallen onto this half-formed world full of half-formed ideas.
We're stumbling out of childhood. Have you ever watched children at play? They play for one moment, then the next they're hitting each other and cursing each other in childish ways, and the next moment they're kissing and hugging.

Alexander: We are just starting to get out of that, aren't we?

Roddenberry: Yes. We should be excused and should excuse ourselves a certain amount. If we were adults, truly adults, we wouldn't have those problems.

Alexander: You are very optimistic about the future.

Roddenberry: Yes. I think we are about a quarter formed.

Alexander: It is as though the human race were an eight- or 10-year old child?

Roddenberry: Yes. And they're lovable. At there very best, humans do lovely things. They indulge in huge charities for the world. At their worst, they steal from the till.

Alexander: So, you are optimistic about human beings?

Roddenberry: Oh, yes. We are a young species. I think if we allow ourselves a little development, understanding what we've done already, we'll be surprised what a cherishable, lovely group that humans can evolve into.

Alexander: I just saw a Polish priest talking about how AIDS was sent by God as a possible form of salvation or redemption. I couldn't follow his logic. He thought that AIDS was some sort of a device by God to permit people to be saved.

Roddenberry: I reject that kind of god. For every AIDS case I can suggest a hundred others that we have had to go through. Think if all of the diseases of the Middle Ages which were human-caused because of the filthy conditions that people had to live in. We are not past that in much of the world. Go to Mexico and smell the stench in some of the poor sections. The same is true in most of South America, Africa, and India. There are so few places in the world where you see human beings anywhere near their potential. What could those people be under different conditions?

This will all be improved over time. We don't have the same stenches in India that we had 50 years ago. It is slowly being cleaned up, but it is a very slow process. This process requires that we exercise some patience. So many humans — I'm afraid most humans — say in effect, "If they can't clean it up now, I'm through with them."

Alexander: We are an impatient species. I wonder about children being raised on MTV, with images changing every two or three seconds, and their inability to focus their attention for sustained periods of time. I wonder what is going to happen with the next generation of television-raised children?

Roddenberry: I think what you are saying is a form of impatience itself. It may be that we have to go through a number of steps before we begin to achieve patience and maturity. What is 100 years or 500 years when we look at the broad sweep of history?

Alexander: How would you like to be remembered?

Roddenberry: That I had great patience with and great affection for the human race. I do not believe problems needed to be solved immediately in present-day terms, and, strangely, that I had a philosophy that did not know what “immediately” was. Perhaps, "tomorrow" is 500 years from now. What we humans are is really a remarkable thing. How can you doubt that we will survive and mature? There may be a lot of wisdom in the old statement about looking on the world lovingly. If we can, perhaps the world will have time to resolve itself.