

# Boldly Going

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## Reading for Reflection

From a short story by Damon Knight

“The Kanamit were not very pretty, it’s true. They looked something like pigs and something like people, and that is not an attractive combination. Seeing them for the first time shocked you; that was their handicap. When a thing with the countenance of a fiend comes from the stars and offers a gift, you are disinclined to accept... There were three of them at this session of the UN and... I can’t tell you how [strange] it looked to see them there in the middle of a solemn plenary session...

The delegate from Argentina got up and said that his government was interested in the demonstration of a new cheap power source, which the Kanamit had made at the previous session, but that the Argentine government could not commit itself as to its future policy without a much more thorough examination...

The question in many people’s minds had been aptly expressed by the delegate from [Russia] at the preceding session, when he demanded ‘What is the motive of the Kanamit? What is their purpose in offering us these unprecedented gifts, while asking nothing in return?’

[The French delegate] said, ‘At the request of several delegates and with the full consent of our guests, the Kanamit, my associates and

I have made a series of tests upon the Kanamit [to measure their honesty]... The tests will now be repeated.’

[And so, the delegates attached lie detection equipment to the Kanamit and led them through an exercise with colored bars. When the Kanamit spoke the truth—“The black bar is longer than the red.”—the instruments remained quiet. When they lied —“The red bar is longer than the black.”—the instruments jumped and registered an increased heartbeat. Then the delegates asked the Kanamit the question posed by the Russian delegate—What is your purpose in offering us these unprecedented gifts, while asking nothing in return?]

The Kanama rose. Speaking... in English, he said... ‘The motives of intelligent beings, though they may at times appear obscure, are simple things compared to the complex workings of the natural universe. Therefore I hope that the people of Earth will understand... when I tell you that our mission upon your planet is simply this—to bring you the peace and plenty which we ourselves enjoy and which we have in the past brought to other races throughout the galaxy. When your world has no more hunger, no more war, no more needless suffering, that will be our reward’...

[As they spoke, the lie detectors registered no lies.]

The next day reports began to come in from government laboratories all over the world where the Kanamit’s power source was being tested. They were wildly enthusiastic... It seemed that those little metal boxes would give more electrical power than an atomic pile, for next to nothing and nearly forever. And it was said that they were so cheap to manufacture that everybody in the world could have one of [their] own...

The [following] day the Kanamit turned up with plans and specimens of a gadget that would increase the fertility of any

arable land by 60 to 100 percent...[And] the day after that, they dropped their bombshell...

[In a press conference, a Kanama presented a box on a tripod, with a parabolic reflector on the front of it.]

‘This device,’ he said, ‘generates a field in which no explosive, of whatever nature, can detonate....If one nation has it, all must have it.’ When nobody seemed to understand, he explained bluntly, ‘There will be no more war.’

We could [go] back to bows and arrows, of course, but that wouldn’t have satisfied the military. Besides, there wouldn’t be any reason to make war. Every nation would soon have everything.

I quit my job with the UN a few months later, because I foresaw that it was going to die under me anyhow...Every nation on earth was well on the way to being completely self-supporting...I accepted a position as translator with the Kanamit Embassy...

It was there that I ran into [George, a former delegate who never let go of his suspicion of the Kanamit.] He was highly excited...said he’d got hold of a book of the Kanamit’s and was trying to puzzle it out. They wrote in [symbols] but he was determined to fathom it if it took him years. He wanted my help...

We spent some evenings together, working with material from Kanamit bulletin boards...and...the extremely limited English-Kanamit dictionary they issued to the staff... We got the title worked out in a few weeks. It was *How to Serve Man*, evidently a handbook they were giving out to new Kanamit members of the embassy staff...

[I took a break from working on translating the book for a much-needed vacation.] When I got back, I was shocked by the change in [George’s] appearance....

‘What is the matter?’ I [asked]

‘The Kanamit have put me on the passenger list for the next exchange ship,’ he said. ‘You, too, otherwise I wouldn’t be talking to you...They’re not altruists.’

I tried to reason with him. I pointed out they’d made Earth a paradise compared to what it was before. He only shook his head.

Then I said, “Well, what about those lie-detector tests?”

‘A farce,’ he replied...

‘And the book?’ I demanded, annoyed. ‘What about that – *How to Serve Man*? That wasn’t put there for you to read...How do you explain that?’

‘I’ve read the first paragraph of that book,’ he said. ‘Why do you suppose I haven’t slept for a week?...[*How to Serve Man* -] It’s a cookbook,’ he said.”

## Sermon

It all began at one of the high holidays of the church year at Cedar Lane—Holiday Craft Day.

If you haven’t been to Holiday Craft Day, I invite you to imagine our entire Religious Education wing transformed, with each room featuring a different craft activity—baking cookies, making wreaths, creating natural bird feeders out of pine cones, peanut butter and seed. Around noon, everyone gathers in the auditorium to sing songs and to eat lunch together. Santa Claus is invited every year and he always makes time in his busy schedule to visit. Holiday Craft Day is a day of delicious chaos, with hundreds of children, and some adults acting like children, frantically engaged in creative activity.

That day, I was walking from room to room with my digital camera, taking photos of Cedar Laners and their good work. When I walked into the orange-and-clove ornament room, I saw about a dozen children piercing the skin of whole oranges with cloves, making designs with their placement and holding the whole thing together with decorative ribbon. I struck up a conversation with Michael and Andy, the adults who were observing that side of the craft table. Michael was curious about my camera.

“Is that a still photo camera or a video camera?” he asked

I told him that it was a still camera but that it had video capabilities. “But the video function really drains the battery power,” I said. “So I reserve using the video function for things like...UFO sightings.” This got us talking about UFOs.

“You know,” Andy said, “Once I went on a run in Greenbelt and over the woods I saw a number of strange lights. I ran closer and discovered that the lights were on the bottom of a small plane advertising for a local business. When I told my wife about what I saw, she said she was surprised that when I saw the strange lights, I ran *towards* them, not in the opposite direction.”

Then Michael weighed in. “If I am ever invited to board a spaceship, my wife has already given me permission to go,” he said.

What would I do if I were met by an alien ship? I wondered. The idea is preposterous but strangely intriguing. If such an invitation were to appear in my life, it would likely be a once and only opportunity. I doubt I would have much time to consider the risks and benefits of saying goodbye to my home planet and traveling with alien visitors.

“But she gave me permission before we had children,” Michael continued. Knowing that I am responsible for someone else changes how I would think about boarding a spaceship.”

This is how a conversation about aliens began in church. So, when you see your friends and they ask you what the sermon was about on Sunday, you can tell them this story. The existence and visitation of alien life forms is a hypothetical scenario, not an article of faith. Borrowing from the television program “The X Files,” the truth about alien species may be “out there” but the truth we consider this morning is confined to life on Earth.

What would you do if you encountered an alien ship?

Remembering my intriguing conversation with Michael and Andy, I decided to ask this question to the folks gathered around the table at Christmas dinner. (I found that once you have discussed national politics and recent family dramas, sometimes it is helpful to turn to stories of alien visitation.) Would you go or would you stay?

“Oh, I would go in a heartbeat,” said a friend I will call Elaine. “No doubt about it.” By the look on her partner’s face, it was clear that she hadn’t asked permission to go before she made this declaration.

As my family and friends each weighed in on this idea, I discovered that this question about whether one would board an alien ship or not is like “the Rorschach Test.” First developed by Hermann Rorschach, this test utilizes a standard set of abstract inkblots. The individual being tested tells the administrator what they associate with each image. The speed with which they respond, the content and specificity of the response and a number of other factors suggest the personality and emotional health of the individual.

This way of understanding human psychology is controversial and subjective, with different testers utilizing the test in a myriad of

ways and sometimes coming to different conclusions. In a similar way, it would be simplistic to conclude that someone who chose to board an alien ship was adventurous while someone who remained behind was cautious.

Yet, some conclusions about personality and choice make sense. One website that explains administration of the Rorschach Test asks “What is a ‘good’ answer versus a ‘bad’ answer? ... Your best bet is probably to stick to ‘seeing’ healthy, friendly images. Avoid dark or violent answers ([such as] ‘I see Satan eating a baby’s brain!’). Butterflies, people holding hands, leaves, mountains...are all generally considered to be ‘safe responses (although nothing is guaranteed when taking the Rorschach).”<sup>1</sup>

What would you do if you were met by an alien ship? Imagine that, like Andy, you were in an isolated location, suddenly confronted with the appearance of strange lights. Only this time, it was not a plane you discovered but a large metal space craft. The door descends down and suddenly standing before you is a strange-looking creature you have never seen before. Perhaps the figure finds a way to communicate with you. Perhaps they wave you on, directing you towards the door, with the suggestion that you should join them. Would you run towards the strange lights or away? Would you go or would you remain on Earth?

This scenario poses two questions, questions that illustrate why this is a subject of theology, not just science fiction. The first question is “What is your natural response to risk and adventure?”

The gift of considering an invitation to board an alien ship is that it offers no guarantee of a happy ending. Even if the aliens assured us that they had positive intentions and that we could return to Earth unharmed, as something so unfamiliar, it is impossible to trust the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.deltabravo.net/custody/rorschach.php>

situation. As Damon Knight’s story, “To Serve Man,” suggests, even the most calculated risks do not provide assurance of safety.

This hypothetical situation is also an opportunity that arrives unbidden, completely outside our human plans and dreams. So often when we consider dramatic changes in our lives, these changes have their roots in our own souls—a wish to live in another country, a need to choose a different vocation, a decision to claim part of ourselves that we have hidden from the rest of the world.

But one day, unexpectedly, we may be given a chance to try something new with little time to think it over. Borrowing from another television program, “Star Trek,” with the aliens’ invitation we may consider whether we would “boldly go where no one has gone before” with the real risk of loss and danger.

The second question that arises from this scenario is “How do you balance your individual destiny and commitments to others?”

I appreciate how Michael qualified his consideration of boarding an alien ship with his acknowledgment that becoming a parent, making a long-term and critical commitment to someone else’s care, changes how we make decisions. While we may be willing to take serious risks in pursuit of the adventure of a lifetime, our need to fulfill responsibilities, to keep covenants with family and community, shapes our behavior. As the face of Elaine’s partner revealed at the holiday dinner table, it may be true that if we love someone, we will set them free, but this freedom often comes with great pain and loss to those who are left behind.

This tension between individual fulfillment and the needs of others in our lives is a conflict that pervades so much of human life. I am in a unique position where I frequently support couples preparing for marriage but have yet to have the experience of marriage myself. Through my study of intimate relationships and

conversations with couple after couple, I have come to understand that many of the struggles in marriage stem from the opposing forces of each partner's individuality and the need to merge into one. Every relationship needs a strong presence of "I" and "we" to survive, a shared reality *and* room for each person to remain separate from what they create together.

Similarly, one of the strengths of the Seven Principles that define Unitarian Universalism is our acknowledgement of both the self and the reality of interdependence. Our First Principle is the "inherent worth and dignity of every person." Our Seventh Principle is "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." While this last Principle is often understood as a value of environmental stewardship, it also acknowledges the fact we live lives ever-connected to other people, to community, to the natural world.

I have a friend, a student of Buddhism, who often says "We're born alone and we die alone." One of these days I will remind him that, at least with his birth, I know for a fact that his mother was there too.

Yet, my friend is right that, so often, the right thing to do is driven by the needs of the self. There is health with what some call "self-differentiation," knowing our own identity and wishes and creating a firm boundary between ourselves and the needs and dreams of others. Self-differentiation stands in opposition to what we understand as co-dependence, shaping our own behavior in response to what others want of us.

Human life is defined by the strength of the self and the strength of our ties to our loved ones. These two strengths are inseparable but often in conflict with one another. How we navigate these opposing forces is the stuff of ethics and faith. How we live lives true to ourselves and with respect for others is a difficult practice of integrity.

Before I wrote this reflection in response to my conversation with Andy and Michael, I invited them to join me in revisiting this question: In the presence of an alien ship, do you run towards the lights or closer to home? Do you leave or do you stay? When I posed the invitation again, they both had interesting responses to risk and the balance between individual destiny and commitment to others.

As Andy sees it, he is someone who craves new experience; to choose such an adventure would be for the experience itself. Andy is comfortable with risk. As he did in a literal way, he would run towards something new, not away from his current life. His responsibilities as a husband, a father, an employee are separate from the question of whether he would board an alien ship. He would board the ship because he had the unique opportunity to do so. That is the type of person he is, as indicated by this "alien ship Rorschach test."

Michael would board the space ship but for different reasons. The existence of aliens would call into question our understanding of human beings as the pinnacle of creation. Knowing that we live lives of interdependence, Michael would want to connect with this alien species to explore our intergalactic relationship. Out of this curiosity, out of his sense of responsibility to serve as a delegate from the human race, he would board the alien ship. But under one condition – that he could tell his family where he was going first. If he never came back or if, due to the movement of time with space travel, he returned after his loved ones passed away, Michael wants to ensure that they knew what happened to him.

After this conversation, I spoke with Michael's wife. She has agreed to this arrangement but stated in no uncertain terms that she likes planet Earth too much for *her* to climb on board.

Since those days long ago at Holiday Craft Day, I have had the luxury of time to consider these questions. By nature, I am not the

most adventurous person so I would probably hesitate before I chose to leave planet Earth. For me, sometimes there is greater comfort in the familiar than thrill in the new and unusual.

But I have also chosen a life, religious life, that calls me to consider life's biggest questions. If I had an opportunity to visit outer space with an alien species, out of my ministerial calling I would have more of a responsibility to go than to stay. (Just think of all the sermons that could come out of this experience!) I would board the space ship and I would bring my camera to document the trip, with hopes that their alien technology would allow me to recharge the batteries.

I posed this scenario to two other Cedar Laners as we drove to a District workshop this past weekend. The driver told us a story about a friend of his, who we will call Bill, who once encountered an alien ship, docked in a remote location. He was not invited onto the ship but was able to observe the aliens, who looked almost like human beings. This day changed his life forever. From that day forward, Bill could never trust that the people he spoke with were really human. He became fearful and isolated, testing everyone around him.

As we drove through Delaware, we three had a lively conversation about whether Bill really saw what we saw. But we concluded that, regardless of whether his vision was real or a hallucination, this event changed his life dramatically.

This tells me that if we were to remain on Earth, the impact might be less dramatic than an intergalactic joyride. Yet, our individual destiny may be shaped forever by this experience, in ways we cannot predict or control. There is boldness in boarding a ship to the unknown and there is adventure inherent in our lived human experience. Sometimes just being alive and open to life on earth is intense enough.

What is your natural response to risk and adventure? How do you balance your individual destiny and commitments to others? You do not need to be invited to board an alien space ship to consider these questions. One day, some opportunity will land in your life, unplanned and unbidden, and you will be moved to address these questions. Whether the opportunity is dramatic or mundane, whether we have the luxury of time or must make an immediate decision, may we choose well.