

Sky Guy: Thomas Webber spends some quality time with science advocate William Shatner



William Shatner caught up with Tom Webber in the Officers Lounge of the USS Enterprise. "I definitely support the exploration of space," Shatner told Webber, comparing its "magic" to the "depths of the seas."

Thomas Webber For the Times-Union. May 9, 2014

What do the Kennedy Space Center, a horse show and a starship captain all have in common?

The answer is out of this world!

Legendary actor William Shatner, 83, is recognized around the world for his portrayal of James Tiberius Kirk in the "Star Trek" franchise from 1966-1994. And while Captain Kirk is arguably the most famous cosmic adventurer in fiction, Shatner himself has long been an advocate of space exploration and science education.

This commitment was recently recognized by America's own space agency. On April 26, Shatner was presented with the Distinguished Public Service Medal, the highest civilian honor awarded by NASA.

The citation reads: "For outstanding generosity and dedication to inspiring new generations of explorers around the world, and for the unwavering support for NASA and its mission of discovery."

"William Shatner has been so generous with his time and energy in encouraging students to study science and math, and for inspiring generations of explorers, including many of the astronauts and engineers who are a part of NASA today," said David Weaver of NASA's Office of Communications. "He's most deserving of this prestigious award."

Shatner was honored at his Hollywood Charity Horse Show in Los Angeles, which raises money for children's causes.

I am proud to say that I had the privilege of speaking with Shatner and I am excited to share his thoughts with you.

Understand that I have been a Trekkie since 1972. My office is decorated with posters of starships, and my home looks like a museum to "Star Trek." Without a doubt, my decision to study physics was influenced by my fascination with this "wagon train to the stars" series.

So to be able to speak with *the* Captain Kirk was thrilling, and I will never forget it.

Looking back, it seems that many personal milestones were marked with just three words: A teacher writing, “Very well done” on a paper; a professor congratulating me with, “Way to go!”; my parents saying, “We’re proud, son.”; or the first time my wife Desiree said, “I love you.”

And now I can add to that list the moment my idol introduced himself: “Tom? Bill Shatner.”

Wow.

Me and The Shat talked ...

SPACE EXPLORATION

“I definitely support the exploration of space,” Shatner told me. “The question of ‘manned’ is a very profound and different question because we’re reaching the edges of man’s ability to sustain human life in space for an extended period of time.

Mars may be the limit of where we can go; whereas, a robot — a computer — out in space might be better suited.”

Shatner went on to say that we, as humans, should feel empowered because our brains can invent means to seek knowledge where our bodies can’t go.

“Space itself carries a magic that is maybe rivaled only by the depths of the seas,” he said. “Fragile humans can’t survive in either place.”

THE SPACE SHUTTLE

There is a singular bit of history between the American Space Shuttle Program and “Star Trek.”

In the mid-1970s, long before the Internet and social media, there was a successful fan-driven letter-writing campaign to President Gerald Ford asking him to direct NASA to change the name of the first Space Shuttle from “Constitution” to “Enterprise.”

I wondered how Shatner felt about that.

“I was thrilled. Although there’s some irony in the fact that it didn’t go into orbit.”

Indeed. The first space shuttle, designated OV-01, was constructed without engines or a functional heat shield and was intended for atmospheric test flights only.

“But it is named and it is in the museum,” Shatner said. “Those of us in ‘Star Trek’ were glad to have that happen.”

The museum he is referring to is the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum in New York City, where the Space Shuttle Enterprise is displayed. It is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

It follows that I would be curious as to what Shatner thought about the grounding of the fleet in 2011, which brought America’s manned space program to a temporary halt.

“It’s unfortunate. It’s unfortunate that the whole space program now seems to lack direction,” he said. “Our astronauts are our heroes, and those guys who led the early space program were American gods, and now we don’t even have demigods.

“Who the successors are remains to be seen.”

EDUCATION AND THE FUTURE

The inventive world of “Star Trek” — or, for that matter, any of the places and things described by the creative minds of science fiction — will never come into fruition without students embracing science, technology and math. I asked Shatner what message he would want to give to today’s youth.

“The only thing we know is that we know next to nothing about what’s out there,” he said.

He followed up with one of the most insightful statements about education that I have ever heard: “The quest for knowledge is the most romantic and remarkable thing we can do.”

So what goals should scientists have?

“The future is more imminent than 300 years from now. The future is 50 years from now,” Shatner said. “We need to keep humanity alive. We are in dire straits, and what scientists need to do is stop overpopulation and global warming by whatever means possible.”

He paused. “Just looking at the overwhelming facts concerning climate change — that’s where science has to go,” he said.

LIFE IN THE UNIVERSE

I knew my time was running out. He had already spent more time with me than I was originally allotted, and I was — am — incredibly humbled by that. But when Captain Kirk says he has more to say ... well, people just better stand back and let him finish!

I chose my words carefully.

“Sir,” I began (of course I called him, “Sir!”), “With planets continually being discovered around other stars, we are truly ‘seeking out new life.’ Do you think humanity is prepared for such a discovery?”

He didn’t answer right away, and the silence became deafening. I feared that perhaps I had insulted him by taking license with the iconic “Star Trek” opening that he made famous. I began to sweat. When he finally broke the silence, his words were very deliberate.

“I think people have to understand that mathematically there is life — intelligent life — in the universe. Just by the sheer billions of inhabitable ‘M-Class’ planets [laughs], there are other life forms.

“So one day in the future we will not just say, ‘Oh, look, there’s bacterial life on Mars;’ one day in the future, we will get a signal saying, ‘We’re out here.’ That’s going to happen.”

I could hear the passion in Shatner’s voice as he continued. “How will we react? We should have a playbook right now. In fact, here’s an actionable teaching device: Let’s do a playbook of how we would answer. Let each classroom do a pretend playbook of how we will answer a signal that we decipher that says, ‘We’re out here — talk to us.’ Let us devise what we will say.”

I was overwhelmed, but the moment had come for us to say goodbye. I thanked him for his time, and he thanked me for mine. And then it was over.

I wish I had said more. I wish I had said something profound that would have properly expressed my gratitude and admiration for the role that he, and the franchise, played in my life — inspiring me to pursue science and pushing the limits of my imagination as both a child and an adult.

But I didn’t. Besides, I figured, he’s heard it all before. I sensed — perhaps naively, perhaps ambitiously — that I had impressed him. Why ruin that by becoming a gushing fan-boy?

Is that justification? Maybe.

So I went home and did the next best thing. I put in an old DVD, turned on the TV and sat mesmerized as his words sent chills down my spine.

“Space. The final frontier ...”