

February 2, 1986

Last weekend I was the guest of Southeastern Yearly Meeting.

Between committee meetings they managed to squeeze into my schedule a visit to Epcot Center. Epcot Center is a series of pavilions sponsored by the Walt Disney organization, where, through a series of ingenious rides and exhibits, we are shown a vision of the world of the future.

This hypothetical future world had several characteristics which contrast with our own time.

For one thing, there was no littering or graffiti. Although thousands, and perhaps millions, of people swarm through this very large park each day, everything was somehow kept fresh, green and miraculously tidy.

Second, as one entered Epcot Center, one left behind all sexually-oriented advertising and off-color newspapers and books. There was everywhere a wholesome, and perhaps even a puritanical, approach to issues of sexuality and family life, as compared with our real-life culture of today.

Third, there was no hint of conflict or militarism in this brave new world of the future.

Nor was there any evidence of religion or theology as such, although one occasionally caught glimpses of a kind of scientific mysticism in which the wonders of the Creation, and of the great chain of being with humankind at its summit, was regarded with awe and reverence.

Problems of the ecology were somehow miraculously solved in this world of the future, and although human beings existed in a high-tech environment, they somehow managed to do so in harmony with the natural world.

But, of course, the greatest imagination and creativity was lavished on visualizations of the gadgetry that would grace the life of Mother, Father, Dick and Jane in the future. The family car was replaced by some sort of intergalactic space vehicle; the family sun-fish had become a miniature submarine for exploring the ocean's depths. Many of these families of the future lived under domed cities on Mars, and were visualized as being so satisfied there that they claimed that they never would live anywhere else!

In spite of the atmosphere of confidence and celebration in the Disney Park, and in spite of the distraction of the visually splendid and technically awesome exhibits, one was left with a certain disquiet about the future depicted, a future which seemed oddly sterile and purposeless, as people seemed to have little to do but be waited upon by machines in a kind of existence which was not only effortless, but also meaningless.

It was scarcely two days after I had been to Epcot Center that the wrenching tragedy of today's space age occurred barely an hour's drive away at Cape Canaveral, Florida.

The reality of the space shuttle program at Cape Canaveral is not as untainted by militarism as is the hypothetical world of Epcot Center. Nevertheless, it is a sobering thing to realize that large numbers of men and women--not only the astronauts themselves, but all the technicians who handle the incredibly volatile fuels and manage the vast array of technological forces which makes these flights possible--are willing to risk their lives to advance us one more increment into a future of some sort. What sort of future is it that they hope for? How much like the construct at neighboring Epcot Center is it?

In the past these sort of risks have most usually been taken in the context of war. Less frequently, but often enough, risks like these were taken by some people to rescue others from tragedy. But here we see the risks taken from motives which seem not essentially militaristic, nor as selflessly compassionate responses in an emergency, but to extend knowledge--knowledge conceived of as primarily technical and scientific.

And when the terrible tragedy did indeed strike, a tragedy which was, perhaps, inevitable, it is interesting to reflect upon how, even in the midst of genuinely felt grief, the idea was so often sounded that we must press on with this adventure into the future.

Whatever doubts we may have about this enterprise, the courage and the tragedy of these astronauts does present a question to us. For what is it that we are living? In what ways do our lives give present expression to the future for which we hope? What risks do we take on its behalf? And we realize, as we contemplate the awful fate of these space heroes, and as we grieve with families so cruelly exposed to the awful sight of the accident, that the worst fate that can overcome a human being is not necessarily premature death, but to have existed without ever coming to grips with the fundamental question of why we are alive.