

Director's Perspective: Faith

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, it has been difficult to turn our attention to science. At the time they occurred, we watched helplessly, and our thoughts went to our families, to their safety, and toward ways that we could help the victims. Donating blood, sending contributions, making phone calls in support of friends near the scenes – any response seemed more important than feeding a satellite orbiting serenely 370 miles above the fray.

We knew at the time that our nation would recover quickly, for we are a people of great resilience. I knew that STScI would do its job, too, despite the emotional trauma the staff experienced. Dave Soderblom stayed after the we closed on that fateful day to inform me how long we could wait before another schedule build was needed to keep HST running. Pat Fraher assured me that the we would continue to process the data even without operators, such was the ability of our automated data pipeline. We heightened security at the Institute. Hubble is also a national symbol. But the next day, we were back to the business of science.

It is precisely because of the progress science has brought to our culture that our job remains important. Astronomy may be far removed from the daily struggle required to keep death in abeyance, yet it has a power to transcend this struggle in a way few other endeavors can. Our progress in understanding the universe has been profound and lasting. It gives us insight into nature's workings, and it has been the engine of material progress since its first use several millennia ago.

Progressive enlightenment is our common goal. Our creed is agnosticism, testing each new belief with experiments designed to ferret out the inadequacy of our understanding. We look with skepticism upon those who are too strong in their commitments to theories of the day, knowing that even the greatest scientific ideas are often overturned by new discoveries, and knowing also that our two greatest physical theories – relativity and quantum mechanics – are contradictory in their basic tenets. Our habit of skepticism breeds a reluctance to act in extreme ways on the basis of theory alone, a reluctance that obviously lacks in persons willing to take the lives of others in the name of their faith or frustration.

Children learn the name of Archimedes but not the name of the soldier who killed him. We all know Galileo, but few of us recall the pope who made him recant his views. Newton, Einstein, Watson and Crick are better known to most people than many important political leaders of their day. We still use scientific discoveries several millennia old. Human politics both noble and evil will come and go, but true understanding builds upon itself.

In the wake of the human tragedy that gripped our nation last week, our job is to do what we do best: to tease nature's secrets from her grasp and give ourselves a basis for understanding the universe based on more than faith alone. It is an important job, one of the pinnacles of modern society. We will not necessarily make society better, but we will

make help society worth having in the first place. Our contributions to civilization will stand and will be appreciated in the future.

The Institute will help you with your own contributions to science. You can count on us to keep the flame of scientific inquiry alive and to make the Hubble Space Telescope as a symbol for our faith in the future.

Steven Beckwith
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Baltimore