

WHEN THE LONG NIGHT COMES

By Michael Ventura

August 20, 1999

"When the long night comes, return to the end of the beginning."

One of the dead materialized during a night of ritual and asked that this message be spoken, privately, to the captain of *Babylon 5*. I hit pause, reversed the tape, listened again, and again. I had heard what I needed to hear, an instruction out of the ether. Yes, that's what I had to do: Return to the end of the beginning. That's what I'd been doing for a long dark time without knowing it, and this enigmatic sentence made my behavior clear in my own eyes. What end and what beginning ... well, that's another story, but suffice it to say that while seeming to move forward I had really been walking in inner psychic circles and now, through the chance of hearing a line on a TV show, I had a sudden inkling why.

The same thing had happened when another *Babylon 5* character said (I think it was the Narn ambassador G'Kar -- brilliantly played by Andreas Katsulas): "I realized I always defined myself by what I wasn't ... not what I *am*. And when you do that, you miss the moments." "What are you?," this fictional soul was asked. "Alive," he answered. "Everything else is negotiable."

The notion of who one really is, and where one should be to do the most good, was a constant theme on *Babylon 5*, and I often found myself playing those passages over and writing them down, especially when the First One asked the captain: "Who are you? It's a dangerous question, isn't it? There's never a good answer to it. I suppose that's the point."

Yes, I played those lines many times, too, over several whiskeys and not a few cigarettes. I'd rarely heard the case stated that directly: that there's no good answer to "Who are you?" no matter who you are. We feel a kind of duty to give a definite and fixed answer -- and surely that's what society wants and demands of us, a definite answer; we have to be reminded, often by circuitous routes, that the question is open-ended. That episode sent me to my bookshelves to recover a half-remembered verse by Cid Corman:

*Don't tell me
who I am
let me guess.*

Those words are best said straight into the mirror, for to accept your own fixed definition of yourself is merely to stay put. A simple and corny lesson, but one that needs learning over and over, at least in my apartment. I feel like such a beginner, again and again and again, forgetting what I knew until it's thrown back in my face from unexpected quarters.

Another *Babylon 5* character, the Centauri ambassador Londo Molari (played by another wonderful actor, Peter Jurasik), had to face the "Who are you?" question from still another direction: "If with only one word *I* can become the enemy, is there any way I can ever be sure *who* the enemy is?"

The fate of *Babylon 5*'s characters hinges not on plot but on what they think of themselves -- it is how they see themselves, and how that changes, which moves the

action along. Just like real life. I started being a *Babylon 5* regular because it was clear, after a couple of episodes, that this notion of drama was dear to J. Michael Straczynski, the show's creator and primary writer.

It would usually be past three in the morning, after I'd finished work, sitting with my bad habits for company, my whiskey and tobacco. I had set the tape to record the show when it ran on TNT in the afternoon, and would wind down from the tension of work by following the adventures of this space station, the *Babylon 5* of the title. Its blend of realpolitik and spirituality, of the historical and the personal; its sense that the historical quest is essentially a spiritual journey with political consequences -- these reflected my own spectrum of concerns better than anything I'd seen on any movie or TV screen in quite a while. As one character put it: "Can God make a rock so big he can't lift it? What if that's the wrong question? Can God make a problem so complex that he can't solve it? What if *we're* that problem?!"

Peter Jurasik's character Londo especially fascinated me. He was both evil and sympathetic, a hero and a monster, hard not to like yet impossible to trust -- a character capable of both atrocity and selflessness, and you could never be sure whether he was about to cause a catastrophe or save the day or both. Londo was therefore particularly tuned to the insanity of the universe. "I want to stop running through my life like a man late for an appointment," he once said. And he voiced this invigorating thought: "Insanity is part of the times. You want to learn to embrace the madness, let it fire you." When his assistant Vir (complexly played by Stephen Furst) asked, "Are you deliberately trying to drive me insane?," Londo, without apology, managed to admit it and deny it at the same time: "The universe is already mad. Anything else would be redundant." And added, in another episode (or perhaps it was G'Kar chiming in): "If you're going to be worried that the universe doesn't make sense, you're going to be worried every moment of your natural life."

I found these thoughts bracing at three in the morning and slightly drunk.

But *Babylon 5* is too interesting a show to rest on one viewpoint. With an essentially European sensibility, it relies for its tensions not on good-vs.-evil but on a dialectic of views. Balancing Londo's recklessness is the fierce wisdom of a character from still another planet, Minbar: Delenn (played with a grounded yet faerie quality by Mira Furlan). Londo sees the universe as insensate and patternless while Delenn sees it as a living entity:

"The universe puts us in places where we can learn. They're never easy places, but wherever we are is the right place. We *are* the universe, made manifest, trying to figure itself out." And: "If the universe puts a mystery in front of us as a gift, politeness requires that we try to understand it."

And I can't remember who it was that added still another subtlety to the vision: "We believed we were superior to the universe that gave us birth; we believed that we could transcend this dimension; that we belonged to another higher plane. We forgot that a door may swing in two directions."

With her almost Taoist wisdom, Delenn (or rather, as in all these cases, the writer Straczynski) reminded me of something I needed to know with the phrase: "Renewal -- disguised as defeat."

Ah ... I'll take that reminder anywhere I can get it: that the defeat of our intentions and our projects is also a renewal because it leaves us stripped of our assumptions -- the only position from which to make a truly new beginning.

So night after night, after I was done working and as long as the show was running, I'd indulge in the adventure and philosophy of *Babylon 5*. Sometimes my relationship with the show would get a little spooky. For instance, studying the Old Testament and reading various translations of the Psalms, I had found no good explanation for the word "Selah" -- a word that appears seemingly at random after many of the Psalms' verses. In *Tanakh -- The New Jewish Publication Society's Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text*, the best explanation was "a liturgical direction of uncertain meaning." For several days the word had been irritating me, when a character on *Babylon 5* suddenly came out with the most logical definition I've found: "'Selah' calls for silence between utterances -- it means pause and consider." When a TV show answers your research questions on demand, you have to start wondering (albeit belatedly) about your sanity.

And when I hadn't seen Hannah for six months, and then we had coffee and talked and parted again, and the world started to whirl much faster than usual, and that night Delenn, I believe, told G'Kar: "You have the opportunity to choose now, G'Kar -- to become something greater and nobler than what you were. The universe does not offer such chances often." Well ... that was going too far. That was getting personal.

And a few nights later: "The past tempts us, the present confuses us, the future frightens us. And our lives slip away, moment by moment, lost in the terrible in-between. But there is still time to seize that one last fragile moment, to choose something different."

These damned challenging messages of affirmation were making entirely too much sense, and they seemed to be speaking to me. "Faith manages." "The truth points to itself." And one character slyly mentioning that "the word 'Babylon' means 'gate of God.'" Or the captain saying, "The first obligation of a prisoner is to escape," but the First One countering: "So -- if one is a prisoner of love, must one escape to solitude?"

But it was just TV, right? An electronic and fascinatingly philosophical drinking companion -- right? G'Kar finally escaping to The Rim, telling his fellow traveler:

"Perhaps we'll find something extraordinary. Perhaps something extraordinary will find us."

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.