Mind the gap

By Carol Howard Merritt
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I sat at the dinner table with my father, a mechanical engineer who worked at NASA in research and development. As he began to talk about his next project, I imagined him opening up his head and scratching at his brain, like Dr. Finklestein, Tim Burton's mad duck scientist in "The Nightmare Before Christmas." Dad relentlessly rustled up ways in which he could alter the world in some dramatic fashion.

My father had been a part of every mission since the Apollo and was the leading expert in cryogenics. He held nine patents—inventions of devices that grew plants in space, conveyed liquid in zero gravity, and compacted trash. (Dad created WALL-E before PIXAR.)

Each contraption had a "Why didn't I think of that?" simplicity that must have vexed his colleagues. One time they worked to insulate a booster, but they couldn't find a way to accomplish the task without the traditional, bulky cushion that would take up too much mass for a space flight. Then someone gave my dad a balloon for his birthday. While they sang the familiar song, he inspected the silver skin. After the final note, he asked how long the material could hold the helium. Upon hearing the response, he turned to the other rocket scientists and said, "Here's our answer." They began using Mylar as insulation after that.

On a nightly basis, dad pulled out his mechanical pencil and drew plans on his dinner napkin. He tried to devise a way to harness the rotation of the earth for a new energy source. He rendered the gears and pulleys that would surely break the second law of thermodynamics. With his pencil, he sketched the pipe construction that would harvest methane from the ocean floor. That particular evening, dad pressed the end of his pencil and told me about the artificial intelligence experiments that NASA had in the works.

I dropped my fork. "Do you think that's ethical?"

Without raising his head, he looked at me though his bushy eyebrows, "Ethical? Of course it's ethical."

“But, what about the theological implications, Dad?”

“What?” He shook his head and emitted a scoff, “There are no theological implications.” I looked at the top of his curly hair and suddenly realized the limits to his expansive intelligence. I understood my inabilities as well. I couldn’t articulate why there would be a problem.

Of course, I can’t be too hard on myself. I was still in high school and hadn’t discovered Philip Dick yet. I didn’t appreciate artists who could turn a particular technology into a magnifying lens and conjure up the future through that glass. I hadn’t discovered that bevy of prophets who dreamed up the ethical and theological implications of scientific industries. And I didn’t realize that the best authors created mythologies with a sibylline texture that could help me articulate what I wish I could have said to my father back at that dinner table.

Now that I’ve discovered them, I can’t get enough of science fiction and dystopian novels. The best authors point out the theological implications, even when the writers or characters are nontheists. Each author warns us that we may not fully grasp the ethical dilemmas that we create with each new technology. We have not lived with certain devices long enough to understand how they will change our behaviors, but we can imagine what might happen.

I just picked up the third installment of Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy. I'm fascinated by how she stretches out scientific realities until they reach a point where we are forced to ask, “What happens when we create gods in our own image? How do we destabilize creation with genetically engineered food? What are the theological and ecological consequences of biogenetics?” Atwood actually does not prefer the label “science fiction” for her work, because she makes a point not to invent things. Rather her exercise is to envisage what our current inventions and genetic mutations could do to us.

Patrick Ness wrote the *Chaos Walking* trilogy, a young adult series which started with a few questions about information overload: “With the Internet, with texting, with networking sites, there’s already information everywhere. The next logical step is, what if you couldn’t get away? How difficult would it be if you could hear what everyone was thinking all of the time? And how much more difficult if you were a teenager, when your thoughts are tumultuous, when privacy is important?” And so he imagined a world where men’s thoughts were unfiltered “and without a filter,”

the story reveals, “a man is just chaos walking.” Through magnifying the realities of our existing technologies, Ness explores difficult conundrums of gender politics and violence.

And who did not have a new perspective of reality television, the Roman Empire, and the ethics of war after reading the chilling and brutal *Hunger Games* trilogy?

Many of our institutional theologians are wondering why they ought to be on Facebook. Many look at social media as a trivia game that they’d rather not play, while the basic architecture of human existence is being rearranged through our avatars.

Who is going to wrestle with the theological and ethical implications of our technology? There is an incredible gap of spiritual leaders willing to take up the cause for our society, and with all of it advancing at such a rapid pace, it’s immensely important for us to be active participants, knowledgeable of developments, armed with the ability to articulate when there might be a problem.

So, that’s why I often wander through the science fiction section, thumbing through fantasy and engage in dystopian exercises. It may have started out with an uncomfortable dinner between a seasoned scientist and a budding practical theologian, but the questions and technologies have only grown. It will be up to us to warn and guide in this important time, and through the lens of the fiction, we can tease out the theological implications and difficulties that might have seeds in our current reality.