Interview of Daniel F. Curry
UCLA Library, Center for Oral History Research, University of California, Los Angeles Interview of Daniel F. Curry

Transcript

SESSION ONE (4/19/2019)

00:00:00

COLLINGS:

Okay. So today is April 19, 2019. Jane Collings interviewing Dan Curry. And why don't we start at the very beginning and hear about when and where you were born?

CURRY:

I was born in Jamaica Hospital in the borough of Queens, and grew up in Bellerose, New York, which is right on the Nassau/Queens border, within earshot of Belmont raceway. We could hear the crowd cheering.

COLLINGS:

Oh, really. Oh, that's interesting.

CURRY:

And I was blessed to have really wonderful parents and a great older brother. My parents were children of the Depression. They both had to drop out of school in the fifth grade to work full time. Their world was really remarkable. My mother got office jobs right away and my father had a lot of unusual jobs, like during the Prohibition era, he drove one of those mahogany speed boats out to the ships that were anchored beyond the three mile limit where people could go out and gamble and imbibe fluid hydrocarbons and engage in the services of young ladies of purchasable virtue. Then he

worked for people that ran sÃ©ances, and then he was a temp driver for the famous Jimmy Walker, mayor for awhile. And he had all sorts of odd jobs because he had no education, but he was an exceptionally intelligent man, as was my mother. When my mother was fifty-five, on a lark she took the high school equivalency diploma, and got one of the highest scores with no preparation whatsoever. My father wound up being a fireman and a foreman for the county road department, and he was in charge of snow removal in the winter. At the peak of his career as a fireman, he became a fire commissioner. And my mother worked as a welfare worker, and then she later in life switched over to become a corporate tax person for the state of New York.

COLLINGS:

That's a fascinating history on both their parts.

CURRY:

Yeah. And what was really formative is in the summers, when I was too young to work, but old enough to go around, my mother would take us to visit the people she called her clients. And we got to visit a lot of the welfare people that--people on welfare that she would be taking care of--their cases. It was really enlightening, because seeing my mother's empathy for these people and seeing their living situations was a very important factor in shaping my philosophy of life and my political philosophy. My older brother, six years older than me, John-- My brother was John the third. My father was John, Junior. My mother's maiden name was Rattler--Florence Rattler. And she was born in 1913; my father was born in 1910, which seems like it's eons ago. My father grew up in a cold water flat. He was the only one of seven brothers to survive. During the influenza epidemic of 1918, he lost his mother and several siblings.

COLLINGS:

Oh, my goodness!

CURRY:

When he was very young, he and one of his brothers, were playing in a horse drawn ice wagon in Brooklyn. His brother slipped, fell out of the wagon, hit his head on a fire hydrant, and died. One of

my uncles, there's-- My brother has these great old family albums covered with carpets and little mirrors, really beautifully done. There's one picture of what looks like a family picnic, and the men are wearing those flat straw hats and--

COLLINGS:

Sure, the boaters.

CURRY:

Yeah. And the women are all dressed up in these flouncy things. There's one guy who vaguely looks like me, who is very snappy-looking, and he's got on a vest and arm garters, and sticking out from under his vest is the handle of a 1911 Colt .45.

COLLINGS:

Okay, well, who was that guy?

CURRY:

I asked my parents, "Who's that guy?" "That's your uncle Jimmy." It turned out that at the height of Prohibition, he became part of one of the Irish gangs--and did not survive the experience.

COLLINGS:

So the family is Irish?

CURRY:

Mostly Irish, a quarter German. And my brother had a DNA test, and we have spatterings of other things, including Indian genes from the subcontinent.

COLLINGS:

Oh, how interesting.

CURRY:

So there must've been some travelers in the ancient times. My brother being older than me, we never competed because our ages are too far apart. So, he turned out to be a really wonderful kind mentor.

COLLINGS:

How nice.

CURRY:

And unlike me, my brother's a very kind person, and I was, probably more of, the black sheep of the family. I loved archery and-- Robin Hood was on TV with Richard Greene. I can still remember the theme song.

COLLINGS:

So you had a TV in the house?

CURRY:

Yeah, I can remember my grandfather bringing home our first TV, which was in a giant oak cabinet with Corinthian columns on the front and the screen about six inches in diameter.

COLLINGS:

Right, like a piece of furniture.

CURRY:

My grandfather, Charles G. Rattler, was really clever, and he taught me a love of tools and working with wood. He rigged up a giant magnifying glass on a holder in front of the screen so that we could actually see the hockey puck when we watched hockey.

COLLINGS:

Oh, what a great idea.

CURRY:

And I heard stories about him and my father juggling this giant TV home on the subway.

COLLINGS:

Now, you were born in the 40s?

CURRY:

1946.

COLLINGS:

So it sounds like, though your parents had gone to work when they were about eleven years old--

CURRY:

Right.

COLLINGS:

--which is pretty astonishing.

CURRY:

I guess it was not unusual in those time periods.

COLLINGS:

Right, right. And did they have siblings who also were working at that age?

CURRY:

Yeah, everybody worked. And one of the family stories is that my grandfather, John worked for Thomas Edison when he was in Menlo Park, New Jersey. He was one of the guys in the shop that would do various tasks. The family story goes, which is probably not true, but it should be, that he was the guy who came up with the idea for a screw-in socket for light bulbs. But my brother has it--when he retired--Thomas Edison gave him a little tie pin that's a tiny light bulb.

COLLINGS:

Oh, great. So that's sort of part of the family lore. They recovered economically to the point that they had kids--

CURRY:

Oh yeah, we didn't know we were--

COLLINGS:

--And bought a TV.

00:09:19

CURRY:

Yeah. We were doing fine, and while they were industrious and really smart, they earned what they had. We never felt want for anything. I didn't know until years later that when we'd go shopping, my mother would skip her own lunch, so she could buy me a little toy. They were that kind of people. The fact that though they did not have the opportunity to have an education, we grew up in a house filled with books, and they educated themselves. They had vast knowledge about all sorts of things, and they encouraged my brother and me to pursue education. My brother and I were the first people to get through grammar school. My brother became a neurophysiologist, neuroendocrinologist, and ran the Problem-Based Learning Center at Ohio State University Medical School.

He is a really smart guy, wrote medical books, he's a wonderful artist too. My father would have been a great artist had he had the opportunity because he certainly had the talent. I still have his pastels, which I don't use. I just keep them. They're wonderful, rich pastels, better than you can buy today--amazingly enough. So, my childhood was spent, apart from school-- Like I said earlier, I loved archery--and there were parkways, which would be the equivalent of our freeways, that had open land next to them. There was one particular area that the kids called "The Hunting Grounds."

COLLINGS:

The hunting grounds.

CURRY:

It was a triangle of land between Dugan's Commercial Bakery, Belmont Raceway, and the Long Island Rail Road. And there were thousands and thousands of railroad ties that were stacked up in storage. Over the years, generations of kids would move them around and build forts there. We used to go over and take our bows. It's the only place we could shoot really far. Interesting enough, that childhood experience years later, when I was working in Hollywood, the three greatest traditional matte painters using oils were Albert Whitlock, Peter Ellenshaw and Matthew Yuricich. Matthew, we became good friends--turned out to be a great archer and we talked about archery a lot. He actually invented the counterweight that goes on the front of bows. When you see competitions, you see a stick with a knob sticking out from the bowl, Matthew invented that. He told me about roving range archery contests. Unlike formal archery where you have fixed distances, roving range is usually on golf courses, and none of the distances are fixed and it all has to be intuitive. You can't use bow sights or any modern things. We used to make a lot of money.

COLLINGS:

How would you do that?

CURRY:

Well, because they were competition there'd be an entry fee and there'd be prizes.

COLLINGS:

Oh, I see. There'd be prizes. I see.

CURRY:

Because of my protracted misspent youth, I was shooting archery every weekend. I even had a target in our backyard where I could shoot down the driveway. There was a little gap between the house and some bushes, and then I had a target back there.

COLLINGS:

So, you were involved in archery and in competitions throughout your entire growing up then?

CURRY:

Well, no, not in competition, that was just pure fun. I didn't get into competitions until I met Matthew Yuricich. One our block, the movie theater was right on the corner, and so my mother, to escape the heat in the summer, would take us to the movies a lot in the daytime. In high school, my brother became an usher there. There was something interesting about the movie theater. One time we were in the upstairs lounge, went to the bathroom, and one wall was all mirrors. I saw one of the guys who worked there open a mirror. It was a door, and he could go out on top of the marquee. I went out there, I stuck my head out, and saw there was a pipe that went from the top of the marquee to the top of the building. The movie theater was maybe thirty inches or less from the next building. As kids we used to love to run between the buildings because it was like an envelope of three stories of bricks. We realized that if we put our backs on one building and our feet on the other, we could climb up. And, so, we realized if we chimneyed it up between the buildings, we could go across the roof, slide down the pipe, and go into the movies through the upstairs lounge. We went to see Land of the Pharaohs, notable as Joan Collins's first movie, with Jack Hawkins as Khufu, builder of the Great Pyramid. It was all, of course, these court intrigues of the day, but at the end of the movie, two slaves, James Robertson Justice and Dewey Martin, who were the engineers, figured out a way that they could seal the pyramids by sliding blocks of stone, which would break these little, cool, ceramic things, and then sand would fill up the pyramid so nobody could violate it. And so, we were-- My

brother and I were really impressed by that. On the way home, we found a dead cat in the street. "Oh, no, well, we should put him in a tomb, like, the pharaohs." Okay. So, my brother and I passed the dead cat back and forth as we chimney up to the on top of the movie theater. There was a grill there and we pried it up, put the cat in and figured that was just for him, little knowing that that was the air conditioning intake.

COLLINGS:

What happened after that?

CURRY:

They found the cat. Well, we never suffered any consequences for it. Then we were innocent. It wasn't malicious.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, but did you go in the next day and noticed that?

CURRY:

No. No, but we'd already seen the movie that was playing. We used to love running through the subways. We would collect allowance. In those days when you got on the bus, they had these cool machines that would sort change. You threw the change in the machine. In front of the bus stops, there were these grills that were the air vents for the subways underneath, and there's a concrete slab about eight to ten feet below so you couldn't drop stuff directly into the station, but people getting on the bus would always drop change there. So, Saturday morning, we take our chewing gum and a long stick, and we fish for coins and that would be our allowance.

COLLINGS:

Very, very industrious.

CURRY:

My very first job was working in Fischer's Bakery. I split three days a week with another kid, Frank Munn, who's now a big a financial guy in New York. For my job--three days a week after school, I would go and scrape the floors with a blade. The people that ran the bakery were Germans. The women in the front dealt with the customers, and the guys in the back didn't speak much English, but they were absolute cleanliness fanatics. I would take great pride in making sure that there were no drips on the floor. Then I'd clean the big pots and mixing machines and stuff. Years later, and until they all retired and closed the shop (they had the best crumb buns and the best crullers), I would--oh, come back, when I was in college, go in there to buy my favorite stuff. They would always make a show of taking my money and going to the cash register because it's always crowded. They'd come back and they'd always give me the same money I gave them. They never took a penny from me. The stores in those days were all single family stores, so there was--

COLLINGS:

Such a different landscape.

CURRY:

Yeah. And no chain stores. There was George Schmidt, the butcher, Larry and Jack's Hardware. Those guys were great. I was always doing little building projects and I would go ask them for advice or if I needed something, they'd go in the sub-basement; they could find anyhing they had. One time, I wanted to do something, and I asked, "Well, how should I do that?" And they go, "So, Danny, here's what you do, take this tool home with you. Don't tell anybody we lent it to you, but bring it in back in few hours when you're done, it'd be okay."

COLLINGS:

That's great. I never thought about that--about you know, a mom and pop type hardware store being almost like what we now call a maker space.

CURRY:

There was also an old guy that made chocolate from scratch. He was from Belgium, and, you know, the obligatory Italian Deli. Moskin's, little department store, and the barber shop. And there was the famous-- There were two taverns a block apart, the Bellerose Tavern and The Rainbow. On Saturdays, in those days, it was customary that fathers would go around Saturday afternoon, have a beer and catch up on the neighborhood news. There was a really snobby little league team in the next area over, and we were considered unworthy. My father was really insulted by how they treated the kids from our neighborhood, so he formed an independent Little League that he funded by putting a collection jar on the bars. The people were just so generous, and then we'd buy equipment for us and made a deal with the local grammar school that we could play on Saturdays. The Rainbow was famous for--the owner was Julius (phonetic), and they had a guy that in those days was known as a swamper who was a janitor, bouncer, jack of all trades that would just kind of help. He actually slept in the basement of the bar.

COLLINGS:

And this was--the swamper was the term?

00:19:16

CURRY:

The term, yeah. Nobody knew his last name, but he was known as Tony the Owl. He was short, had a neck almost as wide as his shoulder, and maybe had an IQ hovering around ninety, really innocent. We used to play stickball in the alley behind the bar.

Tony, since he knew us because our fathers would take us there on Saturday, where we'd have a Coke and play shuffleboard while dad would catch up with the other neighbors. Tony would come and slip us a half-eaten jar of cherries or something. The legend goes that somebody was causing severe trouble in the bar, and so Julius, the owner, said, "Hey Tony, take care of this guy, get him out of here." So, it became very violent and Tony smacked him into the mahogany bar rail and he landed with his mouth open. Tony smacked him on top of the head and set two incisors and one tooth into the bar rail.

COLLINGS:

Oh my gosh!

CURRY:

And so I remember coming home from school one day and walking by the Rainbow Bar and Grill, and there was Tony the Owl kneeling in the gutter with some semi-conscious man, grinding his teeth on the concrete curb. He looks up and he says, "Hey Danny, how was school today?" I asked, "What's going on?" He goes, "Oh, he's causing trouble in the bar. He came back. He was the brother of the guy that they took the teeth out a couple of months ago. And he wanted to get me, but he's learning a lesson now."

COLLINGS:

It's a different era.

CURRY:

Our neighborhood was, I'd say seventy percent Sicilian, and then there were Irish and German and Polish and whatever. And so on our block it was Pietroburgo, Digirolamo, Ambrosino, Tesoriero, Deladona. And a lot of them were all related. And down the block was the Deladona family. And Mr. Deladona was in a wheelchair. He had been wounded in some sort of gangland altercation, and every once in a while the legendary Carmine Persico would show up in his limo and--

COLLINGS:

The legendary.

CURRY:

--and he would park on our side. We only had street parking on one side, but he would park pn the no-parking side and the police would just wave to him. He took care of Mr. Deladona. I was ten, and my brother was working for the Bellerose Liquor Store as a delivery boy. He had one of those bicycles with the big basket in the front, a little wheel. It was Halloween and it was raining, so that nobody was out trick-or-treating. My brother came in soaking wet. He was in shock and his chest was all torn up. One of his nipples was hanging on a flap of skin. So we took him to the hospital and he got lots of stitches. It turned out that he was delivering in the next neighborhood, and there're some tough guys hanging out on the street. They recognized the liquor store bike. They knocked the bike over--

COLLINGS:

Because it was from the other neighborhood?

CURRY:

Yeah, they knocked the bike over, took his money, took the liquor, took one of the broken bottles, ran it over his chest and evacuated their bladders on him. And of course the police couldn't find them, and my brother couldn't really recognize them. So the following week Mr. Deladona rolls up in his wheelchair and says, "Hey, Mr. Curry, I heard that your son had some problems?" So then, they--my brother and my father--told them about it. The following weekend, Carmine Persico's limo pulls up in front of our house, and his driver comes out--and he's the classic driver, you know, the bull neck, the diamond pinky ring, the pin-striped suit, the black tie, and he knocks on the door and my father goes out. And he says, "Hey, Mr. Curry, we know that your son was involved in this thing and suffered greatly. We tracked it down and I've got some young gentleman in the car that were involved with this. They know they did wrong and they're here to apologize and they'd like to speak to you and your son." So, my father and brother--and I was ten years old, also hiding in the back, checking this out. The three guys got out of the car. They were each missing identical incisors, they had matching broken noses, matching black eyes and matching broken arms.

COLLINGS:

Oh my gosh!

CURRY:

They groveled for a while, and then the driver said, "We know that you had a lot of medical expenses and they're going to take care of it for you. You don't have to go to the authorities. We took care of this, and we had to teach these young men that you don't mess with the civilians in your own neighborhood."

COLLINGS:

How interesting.

CURRY:

And so every weekend they'd come by and they handed my father an envelope of cash.

COLLINGS:

Wow, "you don't mess with the civilians in your neighborhood."

CURRY:

Yeah. That was another world. When I finally went to Middlebury--Middlebury was-- I would say more than half of my class went to elite private schools. I was the poor kid on scholarship. I loved Middlebury because they had no athletic scholarships, although they would be a factor in getting a scholarship, but, you know, mastery of a mechanical task was not the sole impetus for being accepted. Let's talk about movies for a moment.

COLLINGS:

Yeah.

CURRY:

There are a number of films that were very influential on me. One of the earliest I can remember is a great science fiction film, Them! with James Arness and James Whitmore, about giant ants caused by radiation. Then, following week, I saw The Last Frontier and that starred Victor Mature and James Whitmore, and that was my first realization that there were professional actors.

COLLINGS:

You started seeing these faces?

CURRY:

Yes. That guy was-- "The ants got that guy in the other movie, and who's playing this--they must be hired to act." I realized they had to be professional actors.

COLLINGS:

How interesting.

CURRY:

Kirk Douglas had a profound influence on me, unbeknownst to him. I remember seeing Gunfight at the O.K. Corral, and there's a scene where drunk Doc Holliday is sitting in a hotel room and he's got a brace of switchblades on a little table, and he's just throwing them into the door. My brother and I were really impressed-- So when we got home, we went into our basement, put a couple of pieces of wood on opposite walls, and we taught ourselves to throw steak knives. Years later when I saw The Vikings, there's a great scene where Kirk Douglas is trying to prove this maiden innocent of a transgression. He had to throw battle axes across the room and cut her pigtails off. Later on in the movie, they actually conquered the bad guys' castle by throwing battle axes into the drawbridge. Kirk

Douglas jumps across and climbs up using the axes as a ladder. And, so of course I moved into hatchets.

COLLINGS:

Of course.

CURRY:

In Ben-Hur, there's a scene where Stephen Boyd as Messala comes back to Jerusalem, and Ben-Hur, played by Charlton Heston, welcomes him back home, and they started reliving some of their childhood moments. They're in the barracks of the Romans, and there's a brace of spears in racks on the wall. Jokingly, they say, "Up Mars down Venus," and they throw the spears into the wooden structure, the beams in the ceiling. I could tell that the spears went down and up, and so I realized there had to be a wire going from the floor to where they hit the beam, and the hollow spear slid along the wire.

COLLINGS:

Because you had already done some throwing yourself.

CURRY:

Right. But it didn't look natural. How gravity normally works is the spears would fly up rather than down. But I had an epiphany: that's how you can throw accurately, imagine a wire between you and the target and just guide whatever you're throwing along that wire. So all of this became part of Star Trek years later.

COLLINGS:

Years later. Yeah.

CURRY:

Then, I saw The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms. You could tell that there was a different level of reality between the backgrounds and the dinosaurs. I found out that there was a rear projection system and--

COLLINGS:

How did you find out about that?

CURRY:

I read some articles somewhere. I had a broken eight millimeter movie projector, before Super 8, and they used sixteen millimeter spools and then you'd shoot half of it, flip it over and shoot the other half, and then the lab would split it down the middle. That's how it became eight millimeter. My projector was broken. It could only go one frame at a time. I realized if I cut a hole in a cardboard box and put tracing paper on it, I could rear project onto it and have-- So I shot movies with my brother's screaming and then moved toy dinosaurs in front of the screen and photographed one frame at a time. The dinosaurs moved very stiffly, but it was fun.

COLLINGS:

And so you had these tools, the projector, the camera?

00:32:23

CURRY:

Yeah. My parents were really great, you know, we didn't have a lot of money, but they made incredible sacrifices for us that we weren't aware of until we got older. But we had a good time, and

eight millimeter movies were popular at the time. But then, Forbidden Planet was an eye-opener for me because, apart from being one of the first really cerebral science fiction films done with a high budget, I could tell watching it that, "Oh, that's a model, that's a painting, that's cartoon animation." I realized you could combine all these art forms to create a new cinematic reality, and it was very interesting to me, and I said, "Yeah, I could do that." Then same thing happened when, for my twelfth birthday, my mother took me to see The 7th Voyage of Sinbad at Radio City Music Hall, another great Ray Harryhausen film. There was a lobby display showing how they did a lot of the tricks, and I was like, "Wow!" I was so blessed, years later at ASC, the American Society of Cinematographers, I got to have dinner with Ray a couple of times. I told him, "You're the reason I'm here." What a wonderful man he was. At any rate, so, then, Spartacus, which is a great landmark film--and I remember going to the theater and saw Saul Bass's, great opening title sequence. It was just Roman statues lit very dramatically in dark voids. And, what was hip at the time, kind of a Courier style type font, very small. With the music, which kind of seemed dissonant to me at the time, it showed me the power of a title sequence. I went from a kid sitting in the audience to being absorbed in this music, and these images that got my mind ready for their first sequence. It's like the overture of an opera.

Years later, I wouldn't have been able to predict that I would get to do it, but I've done title sequences for 118 features and lots of TV shows. Spartacus was always in my mind, even though stylistically my designs would be very different, but just the fact that the power, that the job of a great title sequence is to prepare the audience emotionally and psychologically for the story to follow. At the end of the Spartacus sequence one of the statutes cracks and starts to crumble, and I was like, oh-- So the sequence said, basically, not all is right in ancient Rome. Spartacus was remarkable for a couple of things. I think the first half of Spartacus is probably one of the most brilliant films ever made. And Spartacus was also the reason that the blacklist was canceled.

COLLINGS:

Why? I didn't know that.

CURRY:

Well, they even made a movie about it. Trumbo-- What happened was when they were getting ready to release the film-- Spartacus was based on a novel by Howard Fast, who had written other novels that were made into movies, and Dalton Trumbo was the person who wrote the screenplay, but he was blacklisted. So they're discussing it. They said, "Well, we better call up Dalton and find out what name he wants to use in the movie."

COLLINGS:

Oh, yes, of course.

CURRY:

So Kirk Douglas says, "Well, put his name on it." We can't use it, he's blacklisted. Kirk Douglas never got enough recognition for this. But he said, "How can we do this movie about totalitarianism and succumb to it ourselves with this nonsense? Put his name on the movie." Stanley Kubrick backed him up. They were very insistent, and so they put his name on the movie. And the movie comes out, there's a premiere, and then, Dalton Trumbo's name comes up. And everyone is astonished: He's blacklisted and nothing happened. End of blacklist. And so, thank you, Kirk Douglas.

COLLINGS:

Thank you, Kirk Douglas and Stanley Kubrick.

00:35:28

CURRY:

And Stanley Kubrick. Another thing is that, growing up in that kind of a dense neighborhood in New York, movies for me were an escape. I loved adventure films. The Black Rose, starring Tyrone Power and Orson Welles as Bayan of the Hundred Eyes. It's basically Marco Polo, but with an English guy, and Jack Hawkins as his faithful archer buddy.

Another inspiration to become adept at archery--because Jack Hawkins loved his bow and felt it was the finest weapon in the world. And then films like Son of Fury and Solomon's Mines that took us into other worlds and other experiences.

COLLINGS:

A great era in movie making.

CURRY:

King Solomon's Mines was the first time I realized that the shape of a movie and the shape of a TV were different, because the first movies were 1:33 to 1, and then in order to make them look different when TV started happening, they started shooting in 1:1.85, where they'd actually put a physical metal matt in the projector to cut off the top and bottom of frame to give it a wider screen format. That gave me a passion for experiencing the exotic, which is one of the reasons I had such a protracted--some people would consider it a misspent youth--wandering around odd parts of the world. In a way, Middlebury was like that for me, growing up in the city, going from a borough to a New England town.

COLLINGS:

So you graduate from high school, have you had arts training in high school?

CURRY:

Well, we had art teachers, so I always took art and I've been an artist since I was a little boy. I still have stuff my mother saved that I made when I was five or six. I think all artists experience that when other people realize you can draw, you get called upon to do things. "Oh, you draw so well, can you do this for me?" That kind of stuff. In high school I was given the job to do the decorations for an Arab-themed prom. So I did giant paintings of Arabs on camels. In grammar school we used to have Christmas concerts. I got out of class to create a big mural that had to be, oh, fifteen feet by six feet, in pastels, of Santa's workshop. I included several stories of elves making toys.

COLLINGS:

Oh, terrific.

CURRY:

I wish I had photographs of it. I guess I was always an artist.

COLLINGS:

It was just always there.

CURRY:

It's just there. My father had it, my brother has it, my son has it. It's genetic. At Middlebury, I dabbled briefly in looking at other areas to major in. I looked briefly at sociology and briefly at other areas history, but I realized that's not me. They had some wonderful arts faculty and some wonderful theater faculty. There was a Professor, Chandler Potter, who taught production design. And I learned so much about perspective and construction from him, and rendering. We had great teachers. Lacrosse was my sport, so I played lacrosse, and I loved it partly because there was no professional lacrosse, so you only played it for love, and it's the only sport left over from Native Americans.

COLLINGS:

I was just thinking that.

CURRY:

And it's a wonderful balance between finesse and raw violence.

COLLINGS:

Okay. That's interesting. It's a very interesting sport.

CURRY:

I loved Lacrosse, even as kids we would play lacrosse, when we'd play baseball, the fielders would use lacrosse sticks and the pitcher would use a lacrosse stick so he could pitch really fast.

COLLINGS:

Oh really?

CURRY:

And, you know, with the stick's leverage, you could throw a ball well over 100 miles an hour. Middlebury was a perfect New England town. There was waterfall right in the middle of town, because towns were all founded for water power before there was electricity. There was a bridge over the waterfall and everything was perfect. Beautiful farms around the town, and the buildings were all old. I had never experienced anything like that.

COLLINGS:

Bucolic.

CURRY:

And then meeting so many kids that were really rich and graduated from private schools I had never heard of.

COLLINGS:

That must've been a bit of a culture shock.

CURRY:

It was shock. Yeah. I didn't realize how poor I was. Most of them were really wonderful people but some were not. It gave me a look into other levels of society that I was not even aware existed. I had a couple of really remarkable professors. One was Dr. Steele, who taught African history. I remember he was so impressive that I would diligently take notes in class, and I ultimately realized that I have a good memory, and the notes interfered with enjoying and memorizing live in the class, so I stopped taking notes and just got straight A's after that.

COLLINGS:

That's interesting--speaks to perhaps some kind of visual auditory memory.

CURRY:

Hard to say. Like I can still remember frame-by-frame movies I saw when I was a kid.

COLLINGS:

Exactly.

00:43:45

CURRY:

And another Professor, Bill Harris, taught classics--I loved Latin because it was a way for me to communicate directly with the ancient Romans. Bill also made giant abstract steel sculptures that he'd just place out in the woods in Vermont. One year he offered me an independent study. He had somehow obtained copies of documents that were records of the Roman who was a general manager of the Coliseum. He said, "Would you like to just translate those records and not come to class?" Because he didn't have time to do it himself. That was great fun. There are things about what we see in movies--gladiator movies that are totally tame compared to what they really did. The manager

would complain about the need for more animals or dealing with the dead bodies. It was eye-opening. I mentioned Chandler Potter and Bruce Muirhead. There was a drawing professor who was super kind. He was like the old school classic professor. He taught me a lot about drawing about how to see. Then I got to ski all the time, which was good because Middlebury had their own ski area, so I was exposed to winter sports and making igloos and camping out in the snow in winter. It was a really interesting experience. Freshman year, I had a remarkable English professor, Dr. Littlefield. After I submitted my first paper, he called me into his office. He was also very gracious, old school, very formal, the tweed jacket kind of guy. He said, "I can tell that you're really smart and you have a good grasp of the material, but you don't really know how to write a paper."

And, so he said, "I'll help you if you really want to learn." Of course, I want to learn. So he gave me a lot of guidance on how to organize and shape thinking. One day, he said, "I'm going to tell you something that you may be insulted by, but I'm telling you because I feel obligated to tell you this. I asked, "What's that?" He told me, "You're going to have a handicap all your life unless you do something about this." I asked, "What is it?" And he said, "Lose the thug accent."

COLLINGS:

Interesting!

CURRY:

He said, he said, "I can tell where you're from. It's okay, but a lot of people will hold that against you. I encourage you to approach English as a foreign language."

COLLINGS:

How interesting. This is fascinating.

CURRY:

Speak it as clearly as you can. Not that I ever succeeded. I think not speaking English for a long time helped me come back to it in a different way. Those professors were all great--and I had some

wonderful friends there. After 1968, when it was graduation time, the war was going on, the Vietnam War. I was interested to serve, and I had already known a lot of people who were killed in Vietnam.

COLLINGS:

You were interested to serve?

CURRY:

But not in a way that would kill people.

COLLINGS:

Oh, I see. Okay.

CURRY:

Inspired by John F. Kennedy, I volunteered for the Peace Corps. I said, I'm going to serve, but I want to do positive things. So I entered one program to go to India--in agriculture, and after a couple of weeks I realized, "This isn't for me. I grew up in the city, I know absolutely nothing about agriculture."

COLLINGS:

So you went to India or you were preparing for the India--?

CURRY:

No, the training was in Hemet, California. I didn't particularly--I couldn't mesh with that particular program. It meant nothing to me. The idea of furrows and irrigation, it's like utterly alien to me, so I dropped out of that program and took a job as the ski pro of Macy's in New York. where I'd advise people what skis to buy and mount the bindings for them and stuff like that, which I learned how to do at Middlebury. Also at Middlebury, I learned a little bit about rock climbing and rappelling. There were some guys from Colorado who were really great and they taught me how to do all that stuff. At Middlebury, I also may have done one of the first student films.

COLLINGS:

Oh, really?

CURRY:

I found this old windup Bolex in the basement to the theater.

COLLINGS:

Oh, I love those windup Bolex.

CURRY:

Then the hockey coach hired me to do sixteen millimeter movies of training so he could show players their skating errors. Of course, I would invariably give myself a black eye because the eye piece on the camera was tiny and while skating backward I would bang the camera into my face. I convinced the film history professor to fund a film set in medieval Iceland called A Year and a Day. It was about a peasant, apparently the law was if you could evade your owner for a year and a day, you got your freedom.

COLLINGS:

And this was true? Or was this part of your story?

CURRY:

I knew that it was true that a Year and a Day would get you out of--

COLLINGS:

Oh, that part was true.

CURRY:

That part was true, but everything else was pure fabrication. There's a lot of running with--the theater department had done some medieval plays, so there were a lot of swords and outfits available, so I could get all the costumes I needed. There was one shot I wanted to do where there was a cave about forty feet up from the floor of the forest. It was about thirty or forty feet from the top of the cliff, and you could scramble up the talus to get into the cave. So, in this scene, the hero is hiding in the cave and the men-at-arms are trying to find him. So I rigged rope from the tree on the top of the cliff, down to a tree in the forest, and did something called a Tyrolean traverse, and tied a big piece of two-by-four on my back, and then, I had my friends lower me and turn me.

COLLINGS:

Oh, fantastic!

CURRY:

So then, I'm going down this rope on a cliff with the Bolex, following the guys climbing the cliff so that by the time they got to the cave, I turned around and was shooting directly into the cave. Somehow or other when I was overseas, that film got lost. And so the Peace Corps.

COLLINGS:

Can I just ask you one question?

CURRY:

Sure.

COLLINGS:

You had said that you had friends who had been killed in Vietnam. Were those friends from your old neighborhood?

00:50:04

CURRY:

Yes. A couple of friends from home and our Middlebury lacrosse goalie were killed in Vietnam. Another guy I knew had jumped out of helicopter and landed on a mine. The first friend I knew was a kid that lived across the street from me, Tommy Hoar, H-O-A-R. His mother was an Irish immigrant. His father was a bartender. Tommy all his life always wanted to be a marine, so when he got out of high school, he immediately volunteered for the Marine Corps.

I will never forget the day I was sitting on our front stoop and saw a Marine car pull up in front of Tommy's house. I think, "What's with that?" Then these Marines get out, and they're all in dress uniforms, and they knock on the door. I'll never forget, the door opening and hearing Tommy's mother scream.

COLLINGS:

Oh, my God, that's heartbreaking.

CURRY:

And I don't know that she ever left the house again. So that's one of the reasons I don't have a very favorable view of the Cadet Bone Spurs. You know, the commander-in-chief is the draft-dodger-in-chief--and anyway-- But I was eager to serve, and so I dropped out of the India program because who am I to go and tell these people who've been doing this for a thousand years how to grow stuff. Then the construction program came along in Thailand, and I knew that, that's for me, because I had worked in construction in the summers. We had training in Hawaii, which I loved. Some of my best friends are guys I met in that training program still to this day.

COLLINGS:

Oh, terrific.

00:53:06

CURRY:

When you volunteer for the Peace Corps, at least in those days, they would give you a language test. It was some sort of abstract language, and depending on how you scored on it, they would determine which countries would be appropriate to send you to. If you did poorly, they would send you, say, to a country that spoke Spanish, where the alphabet is the same, and it's a lot closer to English--and if you did well, then you could go to Thailand, Korea or wherever. And I loved all the Thai teachers. I loved what we were doing. Our training was in Waipi'o Valley on the big island, and the Peace Corps had built Asian style village houses there. The Hawaiian staff that worked there were great. The teachers were great. So I loved it. And then when we finally were sent overseas, I was sent to Khon Kaen Province with another guy in my program, who was an agro. He would be inoculating pigs and chickens. My job was small dams and bridges. We had a wonderful Thai boss, Arkom Wyopokee, and he was this incredibly good-looking, a very distinguished man, who had great gravitas, and was very kind. He got a kick out of having these exotic young men hanging around with him.

Our office building was in the main provincial office center. We got to know the governor, who I had a private nickname for, Cochise, because he looked very much like Michael Ansara, who played the Apache chief, Cochise, on the Broken Arrow TV series. An interesting thing happened. They brought me out to a village and said, "We'll be back in a couple of months. You'll have to survey the building site, design the dam, come back, we'll check your plans." I realized, I had been trained to speak

Central Thai. The Peace Corps language training is so good that after three months, with almost nothing related to any European language, I could get around okay. But where they sent me, the villagers spoke Lao.

COLLINGS:

A dialect?

CURRY:

No, it's a completely--

COLLINGS:

Completely different language?

CURRY:

Yeah. It's like Spanish and Italian.

COLLINGS:

I see.

CURRY:

But the kids all went to school there, so they spoke Thai, and they spoke this hybrid of Thai and Lao. There were a couple of remarkable things. The villagers didn't have an education as we would consider it. They didn't have much cash, but they had a beautiful life. They lived in beautiful houses, they made beautiful clothes. They would spend the evenings-- I was so blessed to experience that world before electricity changed it. You know, they'd have wonderful oil lamps--and they'd tell stories--and they had shadow puppets for the kids and sit around and sing songs. A lot of the villages had their own secret martial arts style, and they were really kind to the clumsy foreigner, and so they would deign to teach me some stuff. That began my serious interest in martial arts. And the wisdom of how they worked, and seeing that society where everybody played an important role, and although they had no or very limited physical privacy, they had such respect for each other that nobody's psychological privacy was ever invaded.

COLLINGS:

That's very interesting.

CURRY:

The wisdom of how they would accomplish things, and their ability to work with wood especially. I got the opportunity to work with water buffalo, and my favorite experiences were when I got to work in villages that kept elephants and got to have real relationships with elephants. Elephants are pretty close to people in IQ, I would say. They would take elephants (we have about the same life span), and they would pair an elephant up with a kid. They would grow up together as best friends. Baby elephants are super cute, super friendly. In one village I was staying--they had a teenage son and a teenage elephant. They would hobble the young elephant at night so he wouldn't wander off. They wouldn't work the elephants hard. They treated them really well. The young elephant would walk up to the porch (houses were on stilts), and he rest his chin on the porch. Somebody would roll a melon across the floor, and he'd grab it and eat it. But the best thing was going swimming with them.

COLLINGS:

Oh really?

CURRY:

Because they have to swim all the time, and the elephants are really good swimmers. So you could go out in the water where villagers would scrub them with big brooms. I used to love going around that young elephant, smack him on the head, and he would curl his trunk up and you'd stand on it. He would throw you way up in the air.

COLLINGS:

Oh, wow!

CURRY:

His mother was like the Grande Dame of the elephant group there. I designed a dam/bridge. The deal was that the government would provide the materials, I would provide the design and the supervision of construction, and the villagers would provide the labor. And so they were happy to get the project because a dam/bridge would help them. They'd have more water in the dry season, more fish, and access to travel. So they would apply for these projects, and then if the government approved them, then they'd get it. At any rate, I had these concrete aprons with notches to put the logs in to lay the bed of the bridge on top of. We built a little diversion channel, so we had a dry part of the stream to build in. They weren't very big, the biggest bridge was maybe forty feet long. The mother elephant would pick up the logs and the men jockeyed them into place, and she'd watch them slide the log into a notch. She lifted up another one and the guys put it in place.

COLLINGS:

That's interesting. They were being used this way in the construction.

CURRY:

And so when she lifted the third log, she just nudged with her truck and she laid the rest of the beams by herself.

COLLINGS:

How amazing. How remarkable.

CURRY:

In the old days, when they used elephants for warfare, the elephants were so attached to their drivers that they had to put the driver in special harnesses. So if they were killed, the elephant wouldn't know about it because the elephant would become so grief-stricken that they couldn't control them and they might--

COLLINGS:

Trample.

CURRY:

Yeah. There was a family that carried on the tradition of elephant martial arts for generations. In Oliver Stone's film, Alexander, there's an elephant battle scene, shot in Thailand because that family trained the elephants to do the battle scenes for him.

COLLINGS:

Terrific.

CURRY:

Elephants were the big thing. The Vietnam War was going on, so there was a lot of really weird stuff. It was very surreal.

COLLINGS:

Like what?

CURRY:

Well, there were roadblocks all over the place. There were huge air bases that the Americans had. Interestingly enough, you know how certain products come in form fitting a Styrofoam. Well, bombs came in those.

COLLINGS:

Wow! I never thought of that. How interesting.

CURRY:

At the edge of all the airfields there were piles and piles of these Styrofoam crates that were about two-and-a-half feet wide and about eight feet long, with a round hollow in the bottom. The locals realized that they were great boats that even a kid could carry. So they would just sharpen one end and they made popular boats. I had one.

COLLINGS:

That's really interesting.

CURRY:

So that was going on. We would sometimes go over to Laos and we won't get into things that happened in Laos. But during the rainy season, the villagers were focused on growing rice in the rice cycle, so I couldn't do my community development work. To make my time valuable, I taught architectural drafting at Khon Kaen University, and it was fun. I taught in Thai and helped train pretty good draftsman so--

COLLINGS:

Terrific.

01:03:02

CURRY:

The department chairman was a guy named Khun Dhiti, who was a wonderful man, and we would do some projects together. After the Peace Corps, and doing some things in Laos-- I wanted to clear my head a little, so I went to Nepal, second trip to Nepal, and just did a long trek, walking all the way through the Himalayas to Afghanistan. I had some amazing experiences on that trip. Mostly I was alone, and I didn't speak any of those languages. I sold my camera because I knew I would shoot the film in the first couple of days and I have to lug this worthless piece of metal around. So I carried sketchpads, and that's where that one (pointing to a pastel of a Tibetan nun) came from. And so I would draw pictures of what I wanted. Then I would draw a picture of some kids or a father and so they'd feed me and let me sleep in their hut. I had nothing worth stealing. I didn't realize how dangerous it was, because if I'd gotten hurt, I would have been in dire trouble. But I was really lucky and unscathed.

I went back to Thailand and worked in Bangkok directing a Thai language television series for children, Maitri and the Magic Chopsticks. There were several other Americans from the Peace Corps who worked there, which is how I got in, and we collectively produced the show. It was about this itinerant vagabond with magic chopsticks who could make stuff appear. We had no money, so I built an animation stand and did paper cutout animation. And we got to do little documentaries, like fish farming in the Mekong River or wild elephant training about how tame elephants help train the wild elephants. And then, I started studying martial arts very seriously.

COLLINGS:

And you had left the Peace Corps at this point, but you were remaining, working as freelance.

CURRY:

Yeah, and just stayed over there. Freelancer. Among the jobs I had was, I got the commission to design what became a famous nightclub in Bangkok. I designed weird prismatic structures that ran all over the ceiling, and where the band would play, I got a piece of stainless steel that was thin, like a razor blade, and I attached cranks of different sizes to it so that they would move up and down, making the steel undulate, and then a beam of light would hit and reflect, creating ghostly images behind the band that would never repeat themselves. I painted erotic semi-abstract murals on the wall, in keeping with the interests of their clientele. Then I got to do a library for the United States Information Service on the island of Songkhla. The biggest deal was when I won the commission to be the production designer for the king of Thailand's royal ball one year. I got to design all these huge sets on the palace grounds in Bangkok.

COLLINGS:

So this was really the first time you had done any kind of large scale production design?

CURRY:

Not really. Because before that one of the things I did on the side was that I was a production designer for the Bangkok Opera, designing sets for productions like Magic Flute. I did sets at Middlebury.

COLLINGS:

Okay. Yeah.

CURRY:

And you know, I just winged it. One of the advantages of being an American in Thailand at the time--

COLLINGS:

That spoke Thai.

CURRY:

Well, they assumed you knew what you were doing. Even though a few like me were profoundly ignorant.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, I was just thinking that.

CURRY:

You've got automatic point--

COLLINGS:

You're designing libraries, you're designing nightclubs. You are doing production design.

CURRY:

Yeah, I didn't know, I didn't know what I was doing. I made it up as I went along.

COLLINGS:

Sure. What a great opportunity.

CURRY:

Then my father became gravely ill and it was time to come home. And unlike today, there was very poor communication. There were no phones, you couldn't make phone calls or anything.

COLLINGS:

So you received a telegram perhaps?

CURRY:

No, letters.

COLLINGS:

Letters.

CURRY:

And I didn't realize how hard it was for my parents for me to be away so long and be so out of touch.

COLLINGS:

And how long were you away?

CURRY:

Five years.

COLLINGS:

That is a long time.

CURRY:

But I was just having a great time riding my motorcycle all over the place and then eating good food. Nice people. I met my wife there. And so we came back, lived with my parents because my mom--

COLLINGS:

So you got married and you and your wife returned together?

CURRY:

Right. And we lived with my parents. My mother really needed help. So I took a job just as a biomedical illustrator. Most of the people had training in that, but I had no training in it. So I went in, I applied for the job, and the art director asked, "Draw me a shoulder," so I drew up a shoulder joint from memory and he approved, "Okay." So, I got to design surgery textbooks and go to operations and photograph them and talk to the authors--and it was important to do illustrations, because photographs of surgery just looked like the meat counter at the supermarket. But if you wanted--Actually drawings are more clear.

COLLINGS:

Yes, I can see how that would be.

CURRY:

I did that for a while and it just got really old, and it was like being in school. Everybody sat in rows of desks. The assistant art director would sit in the front and tap on his glass window if he thought you were talking too much.

COLLINGS:

That's interesting.

CURRY:

And they'd play a top forty AM radio all day to the point where I had to accidentally spill coffee in the radio to destroy it.

COLLINGS:

So all of the medical illustrators would be in a room together?

CURRY:

Yeah, about forty of us in one big room.

COLLINGS:

And you'd have photographs--

CURRY:

For each person. There was one guy who did airbrushing and I took the opportunity to learn airbrushing from him. He was an old master. Everybody had a different specialty. Then I heard about a job at a community college on Cape Cod and I applied for it. Fortunately, the department chairman, George Tuttle, was a wonderful man, a great sailor. He had a great wooden boat. Even though I was unqualified because I only had a bachelor's degree, he took my experiences overseas, as an illustrator, into account and he took the quality of my work into account.

COLLINGS:

You had a portfolio?

CURRY:

Yeah. So, I got a job teaching fine arts, and it was drawing, painting, studio arts, and graphic design.

COLLINGS:

Wonderful.

01:11:49

CURRY:

For the first couple of years. George Tuttle had set up that we could house sit for this wealthy family who had this incredible estate on the biggest lake on Cape Cod. So from September to June, we'd live in this wonderful house with a giant fireplace and a wooded lot. Our next door neighbors were The Bules, who were the heirs to the Rainbow Sprinkler fortune, who were wonderful people. They were really interesting neighbors. There was a seven-foot tall Native American guy who lived down the way, whose family had struck oil in Oklahoma and went from poverty to wealth overnight, and he was an amazing person. In the summer, though, all we could afford was a converted chicken coop in Cotuit, and we got tired of that. We just wanted to find a place that we would just live all year round. I saw an ad for an A-frame on Route 6A owned by a first mate on a tugboat. And so we went to meet him and he was a super, super nice person. It had like a main floor then, kind of a ground floor basement thing and then a little loft where the bed area would be. So I said, "Well, let's rent it." It set us back a whopping 150 bucks a month. When we moved in, he had decided to finish the basement, and he said, "Well, if you're an artist, you're going to paint down here. I don't want you painting with concrete walls." So he paneled the whole space-- I mean, that was just the quality of that man.

And I decided to have a studio/galler. We can sell paintings so I had a little, very simple sign that said Dan Curry Gallery, and then underneath it had a little sign that said, "Open" or "Closed" that I could hook up. And then one day the Historical Commission came by and they gave me a hard time. The sign wasn't nautical enough; it didn't have the right "Cape Cod" flavor.

COLLINGS:

Oh, didn't have any anchors there. Okay, interesting.

CURRY:

So, I had to go to a hearing at the Historical Commission. During the hearing, a lanky guy with a big bushy mustache rises to my defense and he makes a very passionate speech defending my sign. I went over after afterwards and thanked him. And he said, "I'm your neighbor, I live down the road, but we don't ever see each other." I said, "Well, I'm Dan Curry." He said, "I'm Kurt Vonnegut." So there are so many wonderful people on Cape Cod. Because it was on Cape Cod, the community college had a great faculty. At first, I was really nervous because I was utterly unqualified. I remember going to my first faculty meeting--and you know, I'm trying to look cool, and I've got this sport jacket on and there

all these distinguished people around, and I'm clearly the youngest person in the room. They introduce the president of the college, Mr. Armstrong--Dr. Armstrong, and Dr. Armstrong comes out and gives a few introductory remarks. He said, "I'm sure you're wondering why I am qualified to be president of a college?" And he said, "The real reason is I'm bald and have white hairs and smoke a pipe, so I look distinguished, and I have hemorrhoids for a look of concern." I realized this guy is really cool. It turned that my assessment was correct. He was really cool. Being in the art department, the other art professor was Bob McDonald, who is a wonderful artist and he made beautiful things using stencils. They're abstract, almost like comic books. They were very complex and beautiful. We got friendly with a professor in the music department, so despite my voice sounding like a cocker spaniel that just gargled with Draino, I sang in his madrigal chorus.

COLLINGS:

That's great.

CURRY:

Bob Kidd was his name. That was wonderful experience. I got to have an impact on some people's lives being at a community college.

COLLINGS:

Yes, that's great.

CURRY:

There were a lot of older people as students who already had careers. There was one guy who kept taking my painting class over and over again. He said, "I'm really interested in illustration," and he was especially interested in the illustrations of Frank Frazetta, who was a very influential artist. He did Conan the Barbarian covers, stuff like that. And so I felt my job was to not tell them what or how to draw so much as just to discover what they wanted to do, help them visualize, and help them do what they wanted to do better. And my point was always-- I used Elvis impersonators as an example. I said, "The saddest job is an Elvis impersonator because no matter how good you get at impersonating Elvis, you're still not Elvis." So you're guaranteed to fail. It's good if you're studying art

to study the work of masters and other artists, but the only thing that will really give your work value is if it is your own unique perspective and expression about your reaction to the phenomenon of being alive. The one guy would take my course over and over again because he didn't care about credits of graduating. He was a welder in a ship yard. Years later I got a package in the mail. It was a book he had written and illustrated. He wrote, "I'm no longer a welder in a shipyard. I can do this full time now. Thank you." Something happened like that in Thailand. Going back to that... In Khon Kaen, the town where my house was when I was in town, there was a big open market called the Pang Roi. Imagine a couple of basketball fields with roof over it and a bunch of little food stalls and little shops and stuff. You could order from different restaurants and somehow or other they kept track of it. On one of my first days there I was eating with my Thai coworkers, and a bunch of kids came by and asked for money, and my coworkers shooed them away, and said, "Don't give them anything. They'll just keep coming back." So I didn't think about it one way or the other. And then one day I was there alone and I saw those kids. Some people got up from their table and the kids ran over and finished what was in the bowls with the same utensils. Then I realized, "Well, this isn't an act. Nobody does that."

COLLINGS:

They're hungry.

CURRY:

And so I started-- food was really cheap. You got a bowl of noodles for fifteen cents. I could afford it on my whopping seventy-nine dollars a month salary. So when I was in there, I would always buy the kids food. One time there was a-- The most famous Thai movie star, a guy named Mitr Chaibancha, and he did a movie, one of the Chinese sword flicks, which were like the big movies in Asia. They were set in the Sung Dynasty and people would use swords and spears and exotic weapons. This was such a big deal in Thailand that they built a colossal, two dimensional figure of Mitr Chaibancha straddling the road in front of the movie theater. It had all these spears sticking through his body, and you could actually drive under this huge thing.

COLLINGS:

What was it made out of?

CURRY:

Two dimensional-- probably thin plywood. There were two movie theaters in town. There's a fancy movie theater and the cheap movie theater. And the cheap movie theater had corrugated metal walls. When I pulled up on my motorcycle and I saw the kids all leaning against the wall listening to the movie. I went over and said, "Have you guys seen this movie yet?" And they said, "We have not seen the movie." I asked, "Well, are you busy now?" And they said, "Well, we're never busy." And so, I went in and--even the cheap movie theaters, you would pick your seats--so I got the best seats in the front row of the balcony. First time they'd been to the movies and they were really excited. And, you know, I got them-- You could get fresh pineapple and stuff to eat. I realized that the kids really needed help. There was a woman in the Peace Corps in that town who was a teacher. So I went to her and arranged for the kids to get the opportunity to go to school, and she found people that would take them in. Many years later, when my family took a trip to Thailand to visit my wife's relatives-- I wanted my son and my wife to see some of the projects I had done, to see if they were still standing. We went up into Khon Kaen, and I said, "We've got to eat at the Pang Roi." So we go in there and a very well dressed young man comes over and he looks at me ("Khun" is the word for mister. It's like a sign of respect for mister or missus, it's used for both genders), and he says, "Oh, are you, Khun Dan?" And I said, "Yeah. How would you know me?" And it turned out he was one of those orphan kids, and that he went to-- There was a girl, Robin Velti, who got him through high school. He got a scholarship to college and is now the assistant manager at the bank in town. I felt really good about that.

COLLINGS:

Absolutely.

CURRY:

Then going back to Cape Cod, there was a wonderful faculty member, Charles Gaup. Charlie was a man with great gravitas, and he always wanted to be an orchestra conductor. Somehow, he won a lottery and got the chance to conduct the Boston Symphony, and he conducted a Mahler Symphony. Without my knowing it, Charlie had communicated with the chairman of the theater department at Humboldt State University and they wrote back and forth. Charlie was interested in helping me, so, I got an offer from Humboldt State, got a free ride, and would get paid to teach two or three courses a semester, and I could write my own program. So I did film and theater.

COLLINGS:

Your own MFA program?

01:25:47

CURRY:

Yeah, that's what I did there. I'm going to go back to Thailand for a moment to talk about possibly the most remarkable human being I've ever met and who--We found out there was one of the great Taekwondo teachers living in Bangkok, Kim Myung Su, so in addition to other martial arts I was studying, I decided to study Taekwondo, too. That's there we met, Robert Clark. Robert Clark was in his sixties at the time. He was working for the UN in opium suppression. He was a graduate of West Point, Harvard, Columbia, and Stanford, and he was a hero during World War II. He was body surfing champion of Hawaii in the '30s. He was a sports car racer in the '30s. Got to be good friends with Enzo Ferrari. They did a Broadway show about him. His family was a very sophisticated family. They were on a first-name basis with Mahatma Gandhi. He had walked across Africa with his mother as a teenager, that kind of guy. He was big. He was six foot two, six foot three, and had been a professional football player. He also wrote books on finance, thoroughbred training, and nd he was in that Taekwondo class. He was one of the very first Americans to get a black belt in Taekwondo, and we became really good friends. He developed a special fuel that allowed the Enola Gay to fly far enough to drop the big one. He was going to go up into the Shan State in Myanmar to do some negotiations with the Kuomintang. I said, "I want to go with you," and so, of course, I did. The Kuomintang was the remnants of the national Chinese after the communists took over and they had nowhere to go and they were trapped. So they moved over into Laos and Northeast Burma and appointed themselves as the police of the opium trade. They had incredible teak stockades out in the jungle. So we went out there, where all these really bad ass guys were heavily armed. It was an incredible experience to see that world with mule trains transporting big slabs of raw opium on their backs.

It also became immediately obvious that opium was not a good career choice. I'll just never forget how much gravitas Dr. Clark had, because these really tough, lethal guys just treated him with great respect, and because of his clear courage, he wasn't bound to anybody. He was also a master knife thrower. I remember watching a negotiation where two powerful men were negotiating over the price of opium. What they did was they put a cloth over their hands and they would tap codes on their fingers, so they were the only guys who knew what the deal was.

COLLINGS:

Interesting. Shades of the old neighborhood.

CURRY:

Yeah. In Laos for example, at that time, opium was legal and they had the opium dens like we would have neighborhood taverns, but gambling was illegal, and so the honest front for the gambling dens was the opium dens.

COLLINGS:

That's amazing.

CURRY:

There was The Golden Cloud. You'd walk through the den and see all these people in catatonic states, and then you'd go to the back and knock on the wall and the wall would slide open. This huge Chinese guy with a chrome-plated hatchet would look you over, and if you've met with his approval you could go in and gamble. It was 3,600 kip to the dollar, so there were mountains of bills, but it was nothing. It was kind of a fun diversion to go there. Everybody had gold-plated guns. It was the most surreal environment you can imagine.

COLLINGS:

It sounds surreal, yes.

CURRY:

Some had custom gold-plated shoulder holsters-- One guy had an Uzi with some kind of a trick holster. I thought it was cool at the time.

COLLINGS:

You weren't scared?

CURRY:

I was too stupid to be scared. It was more exciting than scary. But there are a lot of adventures in Laos that will not be discussed. Then after Cape Cod, I went back-- I took the opportunity at Humboldt State, and it was a great experience. I thought their film program was excellent. I got a chance to do a lot of work-- My theater thesis project, I was very excited about and remain proud of, was called Krorg's View. I wrote, designed, and directed. It was set in an alien prison. And in theater, the play is over there and the audiences over here. And it's always like voyeuristically looking at something from a distance, and I wanted it to change that. So instead of having a normal theater, I took a black box theater and built a series of kind of lattice platforms around. And then at one area where there's a larger thing, there was something that looked like a silver Carmen Miranda attached in a giant box. And standing next to it was a sculpture that looked like it was made out of lava. And as the audience comes in, lovely young ladies will guide them through this labyrinth of black drapes. And on each audience member, they put a little floral poncho and they say to them, "Welcome, Zwimblats," and then they're guided. So the audience sat in the pits, so they were not only the audience, but they were a part of the set. They play beds of hydroponic plants that were also collectively sentient, which is what an audience really is. And so it gave an excuse for the actress to speak directly to the audience because they were plants. So it was a very immersive experience.

COLLINGS:

How interesting.

CURRY:

After the audience is settled in, the sculpture starts to move, and we find out it's a mineral creature that's kind of like a fluidics computer that preexisted biological life as it developed self-awareness. It had been transported to this prison to observe aberrant behavior. I had created different types of aliens. I had a tripod creature, a reptilian, an insectoid, and some humans. The inciting incident that begins the play is when a new prisoner arrives, and then something happens on the planet, which we could see in the distance. The individual satellites that controlled each prisoner malfunction, then they were free to revert to their sociopathic behavior. Taking a cue from Chinese opera, I put a dummy in the audience so that you thought it was one of the regular audience members, a very realistic head, and the guy sitting next to him had a bellows and a bunch of red glitter. In Chinese opera, if

somebody gets their throat cut--for example, the actor will grab a piece of red silk that's inside the costume and he displays a momentary flash of shiny red. In one scene where the evil reptilian creature reaches down and yanks the head up because he wants to eat a Zwimblatt. And then I had the guy with the bellows go (demonstrates using a bellows)-- You see this big puff of red glitter, which for a moment looks horrifically like blood. Some of those creatures became part of "Star Trek Enterprise".

COLLINGS:

I was just thinking, yes.

CURRY:

I was always painting and-- the students ran a system of one-man shows in small galleries in different buildings around campus that were basically unused rooms. Marcia Lucas, who was George Lucas's wife at the time, had just finished editing Taxi Driver, and she came up to do a seminar on film editing, and after seeing some of my paintings suggested looking into doing matte painting. She introduced me to Dennis Muren, Alan Maley and Mike Pangrazio, the great matte painters at ILM at the time. And that kind of started me off as a matte artist, even though I didn't even know what it was at the time. They gave me some guidance. I did some practice pieces-- I couldn't leave grad school because I was a couple of months away from getting my degree and I was teaching some courses, so I couldn't accept an immediate offer. So they recommended me to Peter Anderson at Universal, and then I started designing alien architecture and doing matte paintings for Buck Rogers in the Twenty-Fifth Century and the original Battlestar Galactica. We also did The Incredible Shrinking Woman, Cheech & Chong's Next Movie, shows like that. So that's how my career began, and it exposed me to not only matte painting, but to motion control photography in miniature spaceships and stuff like that. Peter was a great mentor along with another person, David Stipes, who was our matte camera operator, He was incredibly knowledgeable about visual effects. Years later, I was able to pay him back by hiring him as a supervisor on Star Trek. And so that's-- I'm trying to think any other interesting anecdotes. That may be enough for today.

COLLINGS:

Okay. So we're back on with a Dr. Clark story.

CURRY:

Yeah. So Dr. Clark lived in the Siam Intercontinental Hotel with his wife and two Yorkies, Victoria and Pamplemousse. He would pretend that they would pull up around. One day we're visiting him and Dr. Clark said, "I've got to go to Italy and then I've got to take a boat to New York and then I'll be back in another couple of months. What's up?" He said, "Well, I've got to go pick something up." It turned out that after World War II, he was part of the occupying force in Italy. And because he was friends with Enzo from before the war, he helped Ferrari get back on their feet. They had stayed friends and would write letters back and forth. Enzo Ferrari built him a car, a twelve-cylinder silver Dino. So he went to get the car, put it on a ship, took it back to New York, to South Hampton where he had a house, and then came back. Years later when I went back to New York, we went out to South Hampton to visit him, and he said, "You've got to see the car."

So I go in, and on the dashboard there's a solid piece of gold that says, "To Bob from Enzo." It was a one of a kind with the instruments in a deep well so that his wife couldn't see how fast he was going. Of course, we go out for a ride in it, and something really funny happens. We're driving by and pass a parked Ferrari. It's a black Ferrari, but on the side, somebody had airbrushed a sperm cell. Dr. Clark pulls over, walks into the store, and says, "Whose Ferrari is that outside?" and some guy with a gold medallion-- The kind of guy you expect to see. Dr. Clark reads the guy off for about ten minutes, and then he gets back in the car and goes. Many years later, after Enzo had passed away, Dr. Clark got a note from Ferrari Junior, I forget which one it was. The letter says they'd like to get his car back and put it in the Ferrari museum, and they offered him a lot of money. Dr. Clark wrote back, "Well, your dad gave it to me, I'm just going to give it back. I'm getting a little old to drive it around anyway." So one day a Ferrari Testarossa pulls up in front of his house and the driver gets out and says, "I'm going to drive your car back, and then we'll get it on a ship back to Italy." So Dr. Clark says, "You came alone. How are you going to get the other car back?" He said, "I'm not, that's yours." After Dr. Clark drove the Testarossa around for a while he decided to look in the glove compartment for something, and he opened the glove compartment, and he discovered a letter saying, "We appreciate all you did for the family, blah...blah....blah. Maybe you can use this." It was a check for one million dollars, which he never cashed. I mean, that's the man Dr. Clark was. He actually flew out to California because he also had property in Ojai and attended our son's first birthday.

COLLINGS:

Oh, that's lovely.

CURRY:

That's the quality of man, Dr. Clark was. He was just--

COLLINGS:

A Renaissance man.

CURRY:

Yeah, and, you know, he was the real guy that actors pretend to be in movies. The courage, the war experiences.

COLLINGS:

Physical prowess.

CURRY:

Yeah. And extreme intelligence. He wrote books about subjects ranging from thoroughbred training to international finance. It's funny, after he was done with the UN, he would advise developing countries how to use their money wisely in investments and development. He was teaching at South Hampton University, and he had a crew cut during the time when crew cuts weren't fashionable, and he wore older suits. He also had a really clunky Morris Mini, that--I don't know if you know what those are. He used to drive it around. That was so funny because he could barely get in that, he was so big. So, his students would not take him too seriously, "Eh, this old guy, man." His classroom was in one of those buildings where the door to the classroom was the door outside. One day he was late and he decided to take the Ferrari to work. All the students were hanging around outside, and he pulled up in his incredible twelve cylinder Silver Ferrari, and all the students see it. He got out and they all look around. They happen to see the little sign that says, "To Bob from Enzo."

COLLINGS:

Oh, my gosh!

CURRY:

So after that, everyone was taking really diligent notes. So that's one more Dr. Clark story.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, that's a great story. (End of April 19, 2019 interview)

SESSION TWO (6/28/2019)

COLLINGS:

All right. So today is June 28th, 2019, Jane Collings interviewing Dan Curry in his home, and we're picking back up with your time in the Peace Corps in Thailand.

CURRY:

Yeah, really wanted to talk about it because it was probably the most profoundly influential period of my life and it was a time of high adventure, a time of endeavoring to do something worthwhile, but most of all, it was a time that dispelled false impressions of the Third World. Growing up in New York, I loved any adventure film that was set in an exotic location--

COLLINGS:

Ah, that's an interesting distinction.

CURRY:

--and films like Son of Fury, where Tyrone Power goes to the South Seas, finds pearls and discovers himself in the process, or Burt Lancaster in His Majesty O'Keefe, who found copra production in Tonga, and people going to China in the Middle Ages, or people going to South America or up the Amazon. Any of those stories were passages, windows into a world I couldn't have known existed growing up in a working-class neighborhood in New York. Those were the worlds I wanted to be in, and the Peace Corps offered me that world, especially worlds where there was, shall we say, the fish-out-of-water thing, where it's like one Western person in an exotic location, Lord Jim. Farewell to the King with Nick Nolte, a World War II movie, was about a soldier alone in Borneo, and it was astonishingly like my experiences, which were in a different setting and a different era, but there was a heartfelt truthfulness about it. I think the Peace Corps gave me the opportunity to have those kinds of exotic experiences, and it was like, "Give me more! Give me more!" Training was an eye-opener.

COLLINGS:

The training in Hawaii.

CURRY:

Yeah. Well, I originally volunteered for a Peace Corps program that was going to go to India. Its purpose was in agriculture to introduce hybrid jowar, a type of grain crop. Growing up in the city, my affinity for agriculture is close to zero, and I felt presumptuous that I would go to another country and try to influence a thousands-of-year-old agricultural system just because I'm an American kid, and I felt that was outrageous.

COLLINGS:

That was just something that you felt viscerally?

CURRY:

And also I found out that the people in India didn't like hybrid jowar.

COLLINGS:

How did you find that out?

CURRY:

One of the language teachers told me that, so it was like, "Uh, this is really the wrong place at the wrong time." So when the Thai program came along, it offered the opportunity to work in construction and build stuff and draft things, and I'm a really good draftsman. I worked in construction in the summers and stuff, so I felt, "I can do this and I can do it well, and it's the type of thing that I can see the results of what I'm doing."

COLLINGS:

Yeah, and you felt that you had something to offer.

CURRY:

I felt I did have something to offer. So what the Peace Corps does is, in those days, at least, you took a language test, and it was kind of a made-up language. It was all about logic and words and things like that. Depending on how you scored on that test, they would qualify you as to what countries they would be willing to send you to because of the difficulty of learning that particular language. I did well enough on it that I was accepted to go to Thailand, where the language is very, very different from any Western language, even the way ideas are structured. Peace Corps training in Hawaii was really good. It introduced me to the Thai language teachers, all of whom I really liked, which made a big difference, because I liked these people and I liked the other volunteers I was with. I would say maybe 60 percent did not make it through training. They were weeding out people that would be pugnacious or assholes, culturally insensitive, and I think they made the right decisions. Most of the people that made it through were really good volunteers.

COLLINGS:

So how would they make those decisions?

CURRY:

In secret.

COLLINGS:

I mean, was it just by observing people?

CURRY:

In secret. Well, they would observe people. One of the tests we had that I thought was great. We were in Waipio Valley on the Big Island of Hawaii, and Waipio Valley is this incredible dense jungle surrounded by 1,200-foot cliffs with waterfalls every so often. It's spectacularly beautiful. A river runs right down through the center, and in the back of the valley there's this U-shaped canyon with waterfalls so high that they become mist before they hit the water.

COLLINGS:

Wow.

CURRY:

And a perfect, absolutely clear and clean round pool you could swim in and a black sand beach. It was wonderful. There were herds of wild horses.

COLLINGS:

I mean, it almost sounds like something in our day and age would be built with CG.

CURRY:

The Peace Corps had built houses from different parts of Asia. They had a Thai house, a Balinese longhouse, they had a Nepalese house, so that you could get a sense of the kind of places you would be in. The Hawaiian trainers were great. They were two guys that were really wonderful, Earl and Polo, and Earl was a very thin guy who was very wiry and could do really amazing physical feats, and then Polo had one leg missing that he said had been bitten off by a shark when he was a teenager.

COLLINGS:

Oh, gosh.

CURRY:

So he had a plastic leg. Then there were the Thai language teachers and then there were the American trainers, who oversaw everything. They were really wonderful people. There was one guy from Roi Et, Khun Dul, Mr. Dul, who spoke with a northeast accent that all the older ladies, speakers of Central Thai, said, "No, don't imitate his accent. Don't speak that way."

COLLINGS:

That's interesting.

CURRY:

Yeah, and he had difficulty pronouncing the letter "r," so a word for neat and clean would be riap roi, and he would say "liap loi." He was from Roi Et, but he would say "Loi Et." So they had great disdain for him, but he was this great guy, really funny, great sense of humor. Everybody loved him. So I really go into learning Thai.. Part of the training was building a bridge in the valley over the river, which apparently is still there. The big test was a hike up the "z-trail" of a cliff leading through seven small valleys to another huge valley, Waimanu Valley, that I did that painting of. It was constantly raining and they wanted to see who could deal with that and survive, and I'd say nine or ten guys left after that--

COLLINGS:

Really?

CURRY:

--or were asked to leave.

COLLINGS:

That one test.

CURRY:

There was one guy who vaguely looked like Charlton Heston and was seven feet tall--

COLLINGS:

Really?

CURRY:

--and he would have stood out in Thailand, where I'm tall. But he became very aggressive and pugnacious when we finally stopped and had to sleep outside in the rain, and his behavior that evening was unacceptable.

COLLINGS:

That was it, yeah.

CURRY:

He was gone--as soon as we got back, they asked him to leave.

COLLINGS:

That's interesting.

CURRY:

So then when we got to Thailand, there was a week of orientation and meeting important people, and then each person was given their assignment as to what province they would be sent to. I was really fortunate to be sent to Khon Kaen (Province), Thailand in the Northeast, and my Thai boss was a wonderful man named Arkom Wiapoke (phonetic).

COLLINGS:

And why were you fortunate to be sent there?

CURRY:

Because Arkom was such a great mentor, a very distinguished man, and he spoke pretty good English, so he made it easy for us to communicate. I was sent with another guy from my group, John Crowley, who was in the agricultural division. He would go out and inoculate animals and do stuff like that. There was another guy in town, who remains one of my best friends who was in the well-digging program. The people in the Community Development office were really great. I remember the first day I was dropped off in a village where Khun Arkhom said, "Okay, you'll be working with the villagers here and you'll build a little dam bridge." It wasn't huge. It was, by far, on the other end of the continuum from Hoover Dam. It was maybe 30 feet wide on a small tributary, but the point was to have a dam that would hold water back for them so they'd have more water in the dry season. When I was dropped off, I thought my language skills weren't as atrocious as they were until I realized that everybody spoke Lao and I was trained to speak Thai.

COLLINGS:

Whoops.

CURRY:

But, there were kids in the village who went to school where they were taught in Thai, so I kind of learned Lao, and years later, that became an interesting thing when I moved to Bangkok, because the Central Thais thought it was amusing that there was a foreigner who spoke Thai with a Laotian accent. That would be like meeting somebody from Tibet who speaks with a southern accent.

COLLINGS:

Right, right, yes.

CURRY:

So once I figured out what was going on, the very first day, the village headman took me out to where the villagers wanted to build the dam, and how it worked is the--

COLLINGS:

So the projects were proposed by the villagers?

CURRY:

Yeah, the villagers would go to the Provincial Community Development Department and they would apply for a project, and then if approved, the government would provide building materials, they would provide technical expertise, which was me, sadly inadequate to fill that role, and then the villagers would provide labor. So we go out, and the village headman's wife put some sauce in a big banana leaf made into a beautiful tetrahedron out of the leaf, held together with a skewer of bamboo, along with a little bag of rice, and then we went out. I thought to myself, "Wow. That's lunch." The headman went into the jungle and cut up a piece of green bamboo, and made a contraption with a little spike on it and put a ball of the rice on it. Then I said, "Okay." So then we went out and surveyed. A few hours later, we came back. It was a trap, and a field rat had come to eat the rice and got skewered, and so the headman skinned it and coated it with the sauce that his wife made, and it was really good.

COLLINGS:

How interesting.

CURRY:

Sleeping in those villages and watching how all the generations worked together and were valued, that the elderly people, even people that were barely capable of moving around, were held in great respect

and not shuffled off to some unseen resort in the Dell Webb world of retirement communities or nursing homes. The older people took care of the kids. The older people were valued for their wisdom. Being cocky and in my early twenties, I brought special tools. "Look at this. Here's a Millers Falls high carbon steel chisel." One of the old guys looked at me and said, "Yeah, this is soft iron, but watch this," and would make a few strokes and just stroke it on the sharpening stone. "So I always have a perfectly brand-new blade all the time while yours is going to get dull and it's a pain in the neck to sharpen." Watching those guys work, so cooperatively, there were no show-offs, like, "Oh, I'm so strong, I can lift this heavy thing." They would always work cooperatively. I valued the wisdom that they shared with me, and it's also where I began to be exposed to martial arts. In Thailand, it's a tradition going back centuries, where each village had their own kind of secret martial arts style.

COLLINGS:

Oh, really?

CURRY:

So I would watch the younger guys work out and I'd watch the older guys teach them things, and they saw I was interested, they would be really kind and generous to the clumsy barbarian. They started to teach me. From early childhood, I've been a good archer, so I made a bow and I would shoot archery with them. There was one guy who, he had two, oh, 18-, 20-inch-long pieces of soft strap iron that were sharpened at one end like a knife, and every day he'd go out of his house and do ten throws with one in each hand and throw them simultaneously into a stump. I thought, "That's really cool," and having been interested in knife-throwing from early childhood--spent a lot of time talking about that. Then one day, he and his grown sons come to me, "We're going to go boar hunting. Do you want to go with us?" I said, "Yeah!" So I go with them. When we arrived at a suitable spot, they said, "We don't want to worry about you. Climb up in that tree and watch." "Okay." So I climbed up the tree. Then he readied the two strap iron knives that he practiced with every day, while his sons went out and made a lot of noise. Then suddenly I could hear a boar running down the trail. The old man put the sharp knife in his teeth and raised the two big knives. When the boar got to his perfect distance, the villager jumped out, went (demonstrates) and growled and waved his arms and the boar, startled, stopped for an instant. In that instant, he threw both knives simultaneously, hitting the boar in the shoulder. The boar stumbled forward and the old man ran around him, jumped from behind, and cut the boar's throat with the sharp knife that he had in his teeth. Then I realized, "These guys are tough." I thought I knew tough guys in New York. Nothing like this. The villager was in his sixties when he did this, and I realized I had a lot to learn from these people.

COLLINGS:

So do you feel like the transmission of knowledge was mostly from--

CURRY:

From them to me, yeah. I helped them with stuff that they needed to be done and I felt I made a positive impact on their lives, but not as much as I should have, and I was lazier than I should have been, but aren't we all? But what I learned from them just in terms of perspective on life was interesting, and I would watch them--and I was blessed, because I was there before they had electricity. At night they would stage shadow puppet shows for the kids because they didn't have TV, and they'd sing and play instruments. It was a beautiful world.

COLLINGS:

How were you received the first day that you arrived there?

CURRY:

Well, being an outsider and being an American and with the war going on, I kind of got automatic respect just because I was an American, so it was--

COLLINGS:

It was genuine respect?

CURRY:

Absolutely, and they wanted to learn about America.

COLLINGS:

What did they think America was?

CURRY:

Their impression of America was everybody's rich. They quipped about being reincarnated as American dogs because they'd be treated so well. They used to joke about that. They thought America had all the coolest modern stuff. As a matter of fact, one of the most valuable pieces of American propaganda was The Flintstones--

COLLINGS:

Ah, really?

CURRY:

--because they would comment, "Wow, and even in the Stone Age, you had all this cool stuff." I said, "No, it's not real, not a documentary. It didn't work that way." They were very religious people. It was part of their world, but it wasn't the kind of--excuse me if I sound disdainful, but the kind of hypocritical evangelical pomposity we see in some people here. It was just their extension of seeing life and spiritual existence in all living things and feeling a part of a larger expanse, that spirituality wasn't limited to human beings. Their sense of graciousness was something I really learned. To respect other generations was very important to them and became important to me. I didn't realize how much of the rest of my life those experiences would shape, not only because so many elements became part of Star Trek years later, but influencing my thinking.

COLLINGS:

How did it influence your thinking?

CURRY:

Well, in terms of developing a sense of genuine humility and not looking down on people that might exist in lesser circumstances, that we all are swimming up the stream of life and you can only deal with the flotsam and jetsam that comes your way and you can't worry about what somebody's dealing with on the other side of the stream and what's flowing their way because you're not there. That stuff's not available to you, and just acceptance and finding calm and beauty in a world with very limited resources can yield contentment.

COLLINGS:

Well, that's interesting.

CURRY:

And finding happiness without having a lot of material possessions.

COLLINGS:

Right. Right, because you grow up in the fifties, which was the heyday of advertising and new products being--yeah.

CURRY:

Yeah, and innovation. It was really sad when that world disappeared as soon as electricity arrived.

COLLINGS:

And did you witness that?

CURRY:

Yes, I did.

COLLINGS:

And what happened?

CURRY:

Well, when electricity showed up, they would go for--

COLLINGS:

You were there in the village, and--

CURRY:

Yeah, and one day--or I'd go back to a village I'd worked in before and now they had electricity, and then they started getting TVs, radios, a refrigerator, and suddenly they had stuff that people might want to take from them, and attitudes changed, "I've got to protect my stuff." So they'd put bars in their windows and they would build concrete block walls around houses, and that whole openness of "Who needs to lock a door?" vanished. Then the real changes became cultural, beyond just building a new wing on your house--and some of these houses were huge, that were built on giant teak platforms out in the jungle.

COLLINGS:

How great.

CURRY:

They would put different pavilions and separate houses built on the platforms. There was a whole other world under the platform of the house, where they would store carts and other stuff underneath the house. They were on stilts that you would access by ladder. But the real cultural change was now they wanted money to buy consumer goods, so then the younger generations who would stay in the village before would then go to town and get a job that would earn cash--so families were broken up and that whole lineage of passing on the agricultural knowledge went away. Then people would stop singing at night because they could hear artists--"Why would I sing when I could hear a famous singer on TV?" And "Why would I play my homemade instrument when there's somebody playing a Fender Stratocaster?" So the world shifted in a way that they got a lot of benefits from it, but in their eagerness to embrace modernity, they lost a lot, that from the perspective of an outsider, had greater value than what they attained, but it's easy for me to say that because I'm looking from the outside and I don't live there, and if I lived in a village and I could have a refrigerator where I could keep milk cold, I'd want the refrigerator.

COLLINGS:

So where was the programming coming from for the TV and the radio?

CURRY:

Local programming.

COLLINGS:

Local?

CURRY:

Yeah, mostly local.

COLLINGS:

Thai programming.

CURRY:

Thai programming, and then they'd have Chinese programming that was dubbed into Thai. In those days, when you would go to a movie theater, say, if you went to see an American movie--and I should say that the Thai film and television industry is every bit as sophisticated as ours is in the present day, but in those days, they were getting started and they didn't dub American films into Thai and send around an American film with a Thai soundtrack. The movie would go out with the English soundtrack and there would be teams of actors that would follow the movie. They would have a script and they'd be in a booth next to the projection booth and they'd have microphones--

COLLINGS:

How great.

CURRY:

--and, live, they would turn the sound on and off as characters talked.

COLLINGS:

Yeah. That's great.

CURRY:

And sometimes they would change the whole tone of a movie to make it funny. I remember seeing The Wild Bunch that way.

COLLINGS:

And what was that like?

CURRY:

It was very strange. And a couple of films that I later learned when I came back here where considered very serious films were kind of done as comedies because of cultural interpretations--like Blow-Up was done kind of as a comedy.

COLLINGS:

Oh, that's hilarious.

CURRY:

It was also annoying because the production sound, music and such, would pop off as the actors spoke and then it would pop back on, but it was kind of an interesting artistic experience in its own way.

COLLINGS:

It is. Oh, it's great.

CURRY:

Out in the villages, I got to see real Chinese opera from touring companies and I learned a lot that influenced work I did in grad school and work I did on Star Trek. So then there was the overhanging cloud of the war. Thais were fighting in the war on our side and people had their kids being killed. I remember early on, I was in a village very close to the Mekong River and the war was going on across the river. At night, you could see flashes and hear the war.

COLLINGS:

Oh, frightening.

CURRY:

Everybody would stop working in these villages during the hot season from about 11:30 to 1:00 or 2:00 o'clock. It was just too hot. I was sitting on someone's porch and one of the old ladies, came and grabbed me and said, "You've got to hide." So I went inside her house and climbed up inside and wedged myself between the layers of thatch on her roof. I could look down the street, and saw a bunch of guys in black pajamas with AK-47s coming. They were Pathet Lao, which was the Viet Cong of Laos. They had heard there was an American in that village and they wanted to capture him.

COLLINGS:

Wow. Jeez.

CURRY:

And they actually came in the house underneath where I was--

COLLINGS:

That's horrifying.

CURRY:

--it was the first time I understood what fear was.

COLLINGS:

Yes, profound fear.

CURRY:

But everybody in the village kept my presence secret. "Nope."

COLLINGS:

"There's nobody here."

CURRY:

"Nobody here." That was my first--

COLLINGS:

So what did you do? You came down from the thatch.

CURRY:

I came down, they gave me a drink of tea, and went back to what I was doing.

COLLINGS:

Just went right back to what you were doing?

CURRY:

Well, what else was I going to do, sit around and moan?

COLLINGS:

No, I know. I mean go to a new--flee to another village. I mean--

CURRY:

No, no.

COLLINGS:

No.

CURRY:

People saved my butt.

COLLINGS:

They saved you.

CURRY:

So my gratitude and willingness to do whatever those people needed was profound.

COLLINGS:

Wow. How long had you been in that village before they--

CURRY:

About two weeks, not long.

COLLINGS:

So you hadn't had that much time to even build relationships.

CURRY:

But, hey, it's those people. It also taught me that a real simplification of Buddhist philosophy is that everything is an illusion and we are at the center of our own deluded universe and we project our imaginations on what we see happening, so what we believe is true is only partially true, and it's kind of an accepted social convention. For example: although we see him on TV, we really don't know that for sure that Donald Trump is in Washington and we really don't know beyond what we directly experience, so that there's a whole social convention and we project our own needs, persona, psychology, and aberrations on what we're experiencing, and the meaning we apply to it is imaginary. They also believe that there are three kinds of people--comparing to a lotus--those who live in the mud at the bottom and they're never going to learn enough in this incarnation to improve themselves, then there are some in the water that have grown, but they haven't quite hit the surface, and those people are on the way, but they need another incarnation or two to get it, and then there are those who have hit the surface and are blossoming, and those are the people that are on the road to enlightenment. That's kind of true, because you can see in the world there are some people that, just because of their own personalities and convictions, are never going to get it.

COLLINGS:

Well, it's very optimistic to think that the longer you live, the more incarnations you have, that the direction is always toward the light, so to speak.

CURRY:

That's right. And I learned to recognize that their culture is as valid and as beautiful as our culture and that it was self-deluding to look down upon them or look down upon anybody in bad straits, and that

we have to give equal value to everybody. Not everybody has equal value in what they bring to society, but equal value as a being.

COLLINGS:

So when you were training for the Peace Corps and getting ready to go over there, it sounds like you had a sense that this society was less developed, less sophisticated.

CURRY:

No, it wasn't from training, it was that--

COLLINGS:

No, not from the training, but just from your whole life, yeah.

CURRY:

No, it's being an American, you always think--you know, like you hear today, "We're number one!" Well, in the perspective of a lot of people, we're number two, in the toddler perspective of what number two is.

COLLINGS:

So this was a complete change in your thinking.

CURRY:

Yes, because I realized--and especially being born right after World War II and you grow up learning about the "evil Japanese" and the "evil Germans." I realized that they were people fighting for their country by the circumstance of being born there at the wrong time. So it reinforced my perception of the war that was going on when I was there, and all wars, because how many Mozarts were killed on the beaches at D-Day? You know, how many potential great doctors were killed? It just reinforced the lunacy of war and that war is really the result of a failed foreign policy and the failed ability to understand people and the fear of the unknown. You fear what you don't understand. Look at Vietnam now and Laos now. It's a tourist destination. Go there with your backpack and walk around and have a good time. When I was a young man, everybody was shooting each other, and it was like-- What was the point of that? Why didn't we just do the tourist destination then and skip the war?

COLLINGS:

Right, yeah. Well, there's the power struggles, the will to dominate.

CURRY:

Yeah, but that will is expressed by people who will never personally go there, so other people's children will die to--

COLLINGS:

So they project their will to dominate into the lives of other.

CURRY:

--reinforce their egos.

COLLINGS:

So when you were there and the war was going on and the people from the villages were participating, what did you get from people about their beliefs about the war?

CURRY:

Well, they didn't quite get what was going on, although they were afraid of having a totalitarian regime put upon them. Especially in Thailand, King Bhumibol was immensely popular and he was, as monarchs go, a really wonderful king. He really cared about the population and would go out to even remote villages to help found a school personally, so they loved the king and he was a symbol of their culture and who they were. So that's what they wanted, and their concerns were survival, keeping their families going, living as comfortably as possible, and living with honor. Their sense of honor taught me that what I thought was honor was insignificant compared to what they thought was honor.

COLLINGS:

Were the young men who participated drafted or did they volunteer?

CURRY:

Drafted. Thailand had a draft like we did. Then also there were military checkpoints all over the place, so when you were riding on the road, you'd have to stop, and they'd look like something from The Great Escape, where there's a barrier across the road and sandbags and machine guns and lots of soldiers. You'd have to go in, they'd check out who you were. They were always impressive--I thought they were great. They were very careful because they were afraid of Thailand being invaded by other countries. So the Thais were supportive of the war because for them, it's protecting your country from hostile neighbors with whom you've had animosity for thousands of years.

COLLINGS:

So they were working on the American side for that reason.

CURRY:

Right.

COLLINGS:

And you said that electricity came into the villages and young people started leaving and going into town and working and earning money, and that from your perspective, that was a bit of a shame.

CURRY:

Well, it was a significant change, and there was another--watching families dissolve into kind of American-like families, where kids would move away, then they'd establish a life somewhere else and then Grandpa would be left alone in the village, so it was sad to see what had been a sustained culture for generations, within a generation become something else.

COLLINGS:

Within a generation. And did people at that time, as far as you knew, see it that way?

CURRY:

No.

COLLINGS:

Or would they be proud and enthusiastic when their young person went to the city?

CURRY:

Absolutely, yeah, although there was another problem that was happening. The war and brought a large number of American troops to Thailand for R&R. There was a lot of money to be made in human trafficking, and there were guys who would go around the villages and they'd say, "How would you like your family to have a new house? You come to work in the city." They'd go out to a poor village, see an attractive young lady.

COLLINGS:

This would be Thai guys?

CURRY:

Thai guys. They'd see an attractive young lady. "Why don't you come work in my restaurant? You can send money back to Mom and Dad. They can get a new food unit. Dad could get a new motorcycle," and blah, blah, blah. Then they would be lost in the fleshpots--and every once in a while, they--it even got to the point where they'd say, "Oh, we'll build you a new house." So you'd go into some village and you'd see a snappy new structure and you'd hear--"Oh, my daughter's paying for it." Basically, they sold their daughter.

COLLINGS:

They knew that?

CURRY:

Well, I can't see how they wouldn't get a picture of it, but a lot of times, "Oh, no, no, she's working for this family," and stuff like that. But that was a really sad consequence. And you'd see, especially around the military bases, just seas of squalorous buildings that made the ministrations of young ladies available for purchase, and I think that was one of the dark sides of it.

COLLINGS:

That sounds like it, yeah.

CURRY:

That's why when my wife and I began to have a relationship, we were very, very careful, because in those days, it would be assumed that if a young Thai woman was with a young American man, there was a financial aspect to that relationship, so we were very, very careful about that and maintained the utmost of public propriety.

COLLINGS:

How did you meet your wife?

CURRY:

She was a friend of a friend of a friend and met her visiting somebody's house.

COLLINGS:

Okay. Oh, lovely.

CURRY:

She was an executive at the Borneo Company, a Dutch company. She was in charge of a department that imported pharmaceuticals into Thailand and she was also on the Thai National Track Team.

COLLINGS:

Oh, neat.

CURRY:

She was a really good athlete and one of the better female martial artists in Thailand.

COLLINGS:

Oh, so that was a real point of mutual interest, I presume.

CURRY:

But, yeah, those village experiences. After the Peace Corps I did something else for a while, took some time off, went to Nepal for a while, then went back to Thailand and moved to Bangkok. I started working for the Ministry of Education.

COLLINGS:

You were out of the Peace Corps now.

CURRY:

Yeah, and they were doing a show on TV called Maitree and the Magic Chopsticks. It was kind of like Sesame Street. I built an animation stand and would do paper animation, direct sequences, write parts of the show. There were three other American guys who were in the Peace Corps who worked on that show, too, and we all worked with the Ministry of Education, and they all had backgrounds and in media.

COLLINGS:

So they taught you how to do animation?

CURRY:

No, I--

COLLINGS:

You figured it out on your own?

CURRY:

I figured it out. Yeah, I was always playing with things like that as a kid, anyway, so I just winged it, made it up as I went along. It was great fun, and I did projects on the side, a lot of photography. I did a lot of production design work. I was the principal set designer for the Bangkok Opera and designed productions like The Magic Flute. Then I designed a library for the United States Information Service, and designed what became a famous nightclub in Bangkok with all these weird--I submitted one sketch and the very old guy who owned the hotel liked the sketch and he liked my idea, and so I designed weird, tetrahedronal shapes, built into the walls and ceilings, the space inside, and then painted a lot of semi-pornographic abstract cartoons on the wall, in keeping with the interest of their

clientele. That was fun. The high point of my time in Bangkok was when I won the commission to be the production designer for the King's Royal Charity Ball one year.

COLLINGS:

So what vision did you bring to that production?

CURRY:

Well, the king was interested in something, amazingly enough, sci-fi, and so I did a lot of sci-fi-looking drawings. Whoever made the final selection liked my concept sketches and I was picked, but I signed my name in Thai, so they didn't know I was an American till I showed up one day when I got the notice. They were surprised but said, "Well, you won, and you speak the language, so, cool." So I got to design sets all over the palace grounds with a huge team of craftsmen and got presented to the king one day.

COLLINGS:

What was that like?

CURRY:

That was great. I had to learn traditional palace Thai, which was like Elizabethan English.

COLLINGS:

Oh, really?

CURRY:

The king finally came out with his retinue. He was a small, thin man. I went up to him and I did the formal thing that you're supposed to do and I was introduced to him, and he said, "Wow, your Thai's pretty good, but we can speak English," and he revealed that he'd been born in Boston.

COLLINGS:

Did he have a Boston accent?

CURRY:

No. But that was a remarkable experience, and I got to walk around with him, showing the sets and stages on the palace grounds. They wanted a game area, so I made up carnival games, but I put them in artificial craters, like on the moon--

COLLINGS:

Oh, neat.

CURRY:

--and so there would be money tosses, and all the money went to some charity. Then the evening of the big event, Hua and I went to it, and there were all the dignitaries, generals, American ambassadors, and then here's this schlump, myself, walking around in this world. It was a very surreal experience.

COLLINGS:

Well, it's interesting that that would be the surreal experience, whereas kind of being parachuted into a rural village before electricity was not the surreal experience.

CURRY:

Well, I wasn't parachuted in.

COLLINGS:

I know. I'm just joking.

CURRY:

They took me out to villages in a Jeep or I went by motorcycle. Yeah, and there were other Peace Corps volunteers who did a great job, and sometimes we would do projects together when it was a big project and somebody was better than me at something. Oh, and the governor of the province--I was in Khon Kaen Province--I don't remember his name, but he was quite tall for a Thai and his facial features looked more Apache than they did Thai, so my nickname for him was "Cochise," after my favorite Apache chief. His office was on the same floor as the Community Development Department offices, and I would go by and chat with him once in a while. Being an American and being a foreigner, I wasn't even aware of the social graces that existed between different levels of authority, so that a Thai person on my level at work would--

COLLINGS:

Never.

CURRY:

--not presume to talk to the governor, and, "Hey, how you doing?" And because of that, he was amused by this exotic Westerner and we became quite friendly, and he would take me to boxing matches and stuff.

COLLINGS:

Oh, really?

CURRY:

Yeah. It was one of the wonderful relationships I had. Another relationship I had when I moved to Bangkok, I lived on the Thonburi side of the Chao Phraya River. Bangkok is on the other side of the river. At night coming back, especially if I was out fooling around, which I did with regularity, I would take a ferry back across the river to my place, or sometimes I'd take the bridge if I was driving my motorcycle, but after several near-death accidents, I gave up driving my motorcycle in Bangkok. One night I was coming back late and the ferry wasn't around. I didn't see the ferry, and I saw an old man in a sampan. It was like a blunt canoe kind of boat, a little wider, but they had blunt front and back ends which served as a gangplank to get in and out of the boat. Incredibly brilliant design.

COLLINGS:

I didn't know that's what those ends were for. That makes a lot of sense.

CURRY:

Yeah. So one night he said, "I'll take you across." He was old, he looked like he was 150 years old, but who knows how old he really was. He really liked it quiet. That was why he worked at night. He was a very devout Buddhist, and when his children were grown and everybody was taken care of, he embraced a life of poverty, kind of like emulating the Buddha or Francis of Assisi embracing poverty in medieval Europe. We would get in the boat and we would just have these incredible philosophical conversations, and I always thought of him as the boatman in Siddhartha.

COLLINGS:

That's exactly what I was thinking of, yeah, or the boatman of ferrying souls is what I was thinking of.

CURRY:

Yeah, at the River Styx. I think Charon was his name.

COLLINGS:

Yes.

CURRY:

At any rate, one night he said, "Are you in a hurry?" "Absolutely not." So he skulled upstream, turned, caught the current, and just with a few corrections, hit my dock, and that was a wonderful experience.

COLLINGS:

Why did you choose to live where you lived across the river from Bangkok?

CURRY:

Cheap. Somebody introduced me to a Thai naval officer who owned a house that he was willing to rent to me. It was like living in Disneyland, because it was a neighborhood of very tall, kind of industrial, featureless concrete buildings, but there was a gap between two of the tall buildings that was maybe ten feet wide and maybe 100 yards long and you'd go through that gap and then you'd come out in Disneyland, and it was an area that had once been a fruit plantation, so it was an area of

beautiful little islands that had two or three houses on each island and they were all connected by these elaborate system of boardwalks.

COLLINGS:

Oh, how interesting.

CURRY:

The neighbors in Thonburi were really fun. I met some guys that were serious martial artists. They had a martial arts training system in their yard, and I would go hang out with them. Then one day I saw a bunch of old guys carrying fish in little glass bowls. So I went up to them and asked, "What's going on?" They said, "Come with us." "Okay." So we go deep into an area that I'd never really explored before and there was an amphitheater, an eight-sided amphitheater that was maybe 20 feet in diameter, and a table in the middle and a big round glass aquarium. It was for fighting fish, and they would pour the fighting fish into the water and bet. That was something you don't see every day here.

COLLINGS:

No, it's not, and this idea of carrying these fish through the street and then sort of following them down these pathways, it's very mythical, really.

CURRY:

Yeah, it was beautiful. The martial artists that I became friendly with were waiters in a restaurant in a big public market near a place called Big Traffic Circle, and it was a big--

COLLINGS:

That was called Big Traffic Circle? That was the name of it?

CURRY:

Yeah, and it's a big traffic circle. I was on my way home late one night, and stopped in to eat because they made the best oyster omelets. While I was in there eating an oyster omelet, a drunk Thai soldier comes by, sees me sitting there, and it was a neighborhood that no Westerners lived in. I was the only one. The guy was trying to be friendly but I just wanted to go home. The drunk starts getting aggressive and obnoxious, and finally he slaps his hand on the table and I see this blur. You know those giant Asian cleavers? So my friend the waiter slams the cleaver into the table right between the fingers of the guy's hand. It didn't hit him, but right between fingers. And he leans over and he says, "You're bothering my friend." The drunk just slides his hand away and politely says, "Goodnight."

COLLINGS:

That's a movie moment.

CURRY:

So, yeah, there were lots of them. In Laos, it was interesting, gambling was illegal in Laos, but opium and other controlled substances were not, and so the honest front for the famous gambling places were opium dens, and there was one, the Golden Cloud.

COLLINGS:

The Golden Cloud.

CURRY:

Yeah. So it was a good place, you know, something to do. You'd go in there, and talk about surreal experiences. Upon entering, you'd walk through this opium den, which is very dark with wooden walls and wooden ceilings, and there was a platform where the opium was dispensed to customers in a

pipe. You'd see all the patrons laying down staring at the ceiling, and it became readily apparent opium was not a good career choice. You'd knock on the back wall and the wall would slide open. A huge Chinese guy with a chrome-plated hatchet would look you over, and if you met with his approval, you could go in and gamble. It was 3,200 kip to the dollar in those days, so everybody had these big bags of cash. The gambling took place on a big table with lots of squares with numbers and animals painted on them. The croupier would have three die and two rice bowls and he'd shake them up, and then, somehow or other, I never figured out the game, but you'd see--

COLLINGS:

Was it with cards?

CURRY:

Dice.

COLLINGS:

Just dice. Okay.

CURRY:

But what was weird is the Americans that had reason to be in Laos were all there, and they'd have gold-plated guns in shoulder holsters. One guy had an Uzi and a trick rig, like a holster, and it's like, okay, these guys are strange--but it was exciting.

COLLINGS:

Who used opium? Males, females, upper class, lower class? Did you ever get a sense of that?

CURRY:

It was across the board in terms of levels of society. There were people who didn't find enough satisfaction in their real life so they looked for an escape to the dream world. But it's really bad. It's something that--a lot of people don't know that opium was introduced to Asia by the British.

COLLINGS:

No, I know that, yes.

CURRY:

Because the Chinese would only accept payment for tea in silver and the British had a big cash drain, so they brought opium from the Middle East, gave it out for free but when people were addicted, "Oh, you want more? Well, now you've got to pay us."

COLLINGS:

"Here you go."

CURRY:

What we call the Boxer Rebellion was what the Asians called the Opium War. It was to get opium and the "foreign devils" who brought it out of our country.

COLLINGS:

Yes, very interesting. So just backtracking a little bit, what inspired you to go on your trek to Nepal? Because it sounds like you're so oriented toward the urban spaces.

CURRY:

Well, not really. Khon Kaen certainly was hardly urban.

COLLINGS:

I mean, once you got out of the Peace Corps, it sounds like you were, you know--

CURRY:

Well, it was kind of like the Tyrone Power movie The Black Rose, where it's basically Marco Polo with fictional British characters, with Tyrone Power and Jack Hawkins. They go from medieval England to China in the 1200s. It was to experience that and to kind of adventure--a lot of odd things had happened and I was somewhat confused about things and personal issues. I had read a book which was made into a movie, also with Tyrone Power, that was on this morning, The Razor's Edge. It was about a war veteran who needed to clear his head. He went to Tibet and met these old masters, and I wanted to experience something like that, just by wandering through the mountains. How I survived was--I didn't speak any of those languages. A lot of people spoke English because Nepal had a long history of relationship with Great Britain-- I would draw pictures of things I wanted or needed and people would figure it out, or I'd draw a picture of somebody's kid or grandparent and then they'd feed me and let me sleep in their hut.

COLLINGS:

What a great exchange.

CURRY:

It was basically head cleaning, and, interestingly enough, one of my friends who worked with me as a coordinator on Star Trek had worked on a television series that was such a toxic experience for him that made him so profoundly miserable that he was thinking about never working in the entertainment industry again. So we went to lunch and I was talking to him and said, "Go to Nepal. Walk through the mountains." So he and his brother did that and they were there for two months and came back, and his head was cleansed. There's something about those mountains--

COLLINGS:

Those mountains in particular?

CURRY:

Yeah, I think so. You know, the Rockies are just as spectacular and probably the Alps are just as spectacular, but it's not just the geography of the place, but it's the spirituality of the place, that the people who live there have such a profound spiritual connection and spiritual awareness of the non-physical aspect of existence that is part of their life, and their religion is not one where you go someplace to a special structure and commune with people who tell you how to interpret your relationship with a supreme being. They live it every day. And the magnificence of those mountains and the feeling that you're back in the Middle Ages and you're out of the flow of time, you're out of the modern sense of time.

COLLINGS:

You're out of time.

CURRY:

I was seeking that--to sound trite, that kind of spiritual fulfillment, where I just wanted to get away from things that had come to burden me and make me question a lot of things that had been intrinsic beliefs since I was a child, and issues of guilt about not having done what I should have done under certain circumstances. Certain things that I'd seen that were horrific. Trekking was like going out and

suddenly having the ghost of Jacob Marley shedding the chains. It was, you know, the mountains, the air, the people, the ancientness of it, the spiritual connection that people had with their environment, the generosity of the people, the fact that I had nothing worth stealing.

COLLINGS:

Nothing worth--

CURRY:

Stealing. Nobody wanted anything from me and, clearly, I wanted nothing from them other than maybe to feed me once in a while. I think that experience did the job, as it did for my friend last year.

COLLINGS:

So you had a big problem and you needed a big cure, so you headed to the mountains of Nepal.

CURRY:

And stepping out of the world that I knew and into a world I wanted to experience. I think I needed that trip to the Middle Ages, in a way, and after that, it was like going on vacation, but a very long one. Like, somebody who works in an office and they're in a cubicle for fifty weeks a year and they go to the Bahamas for two weeks, if they're not eaten by a shark, they come back refreshed.

COLLINGS:

You needed more than that.

CURRY:

I needed a little bit more than that, but it still lives with me.

COLLINGS:

How long was the trip?

CURRY:

About seven months.

COLLINGS:

Oh, jeez.

CURRY:

It still lives with me. I'm so glad I did it. I'm so glad I was mostly alone and I'm so glad I didn't have an iPhone.

COLLINGS:

Yes, oh, gosh, yes.

CURRY:

I didn't take any pictures, did a few drawings, so it was an internal experience. One of the things I learned is to not want anything so desperately as to be willing to compromise who I am and what I believe is right and wrong in order to get it.

COLLINGS:

How did you get that from the trip?

CURRY:

Well, just being in those mountains is so humbling, that you're a speck in a landscape that is so profoundly beautiful and profoundly majestic that you can't not go there and not be humbled unless you're utterly numb to your surroundings.

COLLINGS:

So it's majestic, it's immensely beautiful, it's immutable.

CURRY:

Yeah, and it's the people. What's amazing is you can be walking on a trail somewhere and there's a rock, a boulder that somebody spent an incredible amount of time carving a chair in the boulder to have a perfect view, and where they carved it out there'd be little walls on the side with Tibetan inscriptions, so if you sit down in that area and then you just look out and the view's perfect, and then there's--I couldn't read them, but it was clear the things to be a cause of meditation. Sometimes somebody would even install a prayer wheel that you could spin, and I was impressed by the fact that somebody did that for no gain whatsoever. I have a theory that--there's certain festivals in Thailand where they make incredibly beautiful sculpture out of fruit, where they'll take, say, a slice of a watermelon shell and make wings of a mythological bird creature out of it. They're beautiful, but they can only have spiritual value because the artists who make them know they're going to rot and they will only have a short finite temporal existence. Even what we think are immortal works of art, like

the sculptures of Ramses from ancient Egypt or the Sistine Chapel, all of them are as temporal in a celestial--

COLLINGS:

In geological time.

CURRY:

So, just reminding us of--and even the mountains will be dust one day when we're engulfed by the sun going nova. So it's important not to take yourself and your accomplishments too seriously, and I think that level of humility and interconnectedness had such a profound positive influence on my ability to relate. Maybe I would have had a more successful career if I was less humble. Maybe my feelings of self-worth are much more limited than a lot of people who I've seen have risen to positions of great notoriety, but have failed to earn my respect in the process.

COLLINGS:

Well, that's the key right there. So was the trip a circle or did you go one way and you--

CURRY:

I flew back from Afghanistan.

COLLINGS:

I see. Okay. Oh, that's a very interesting trip.

CURRY:

What was amazing, though, is I didn't realize, I guess being self-absorbed as a lot of young men are, how difficult it had to be for my parents.

COLLINGS:

I was thinking that, yeah, just completely incommunicado.

CURRY:

Yeah, and now that I have a son who I don't see as often as I'd like to, living on opposite coasts, but I can call him every day. I was out of touch with my parents for a long time. I try to imagine what it was like for them just to not know. I was blessed with wonderful loving parents who possessed great integrity and were really honest, wonderful people to whom I owe everything, but I didn't, at the time, realize how cruel--

COLLINGS:

You can't realize that.

CURRY:

--a time I inflicted on them, and that they just didn't know.

COLLINGS:

Where--

CURRY:

Where I was.

COLLINGS:

And there's a war going on over there.

CURRY:

And how foolish I was traveling like that alone. If I'd fallen down, gotten hurt, nobody would have found me, and, you know, I was just really lucky. The powers that be look with kindness on fools.

COLLINGS:

Sometimes that's very true. So what city in Afghanistan did you emerge into and catch you flight back?

CURRY:

Kabul.

COLLINGS:

What was Kabul like at the time?

CURRY:

Dirty, architecturally unimpressive. However, the Hunza Valley was not. I'm sure you've seen lots of pictures of Afghanistan, and it's pretty arid, looks like a giant sand quarry with spectacular mountains in the background, but there's one area that is green and plush. A legend goes that a lost battalion of Alexander the Great's army found their way in there and founded a culture that's distinct and unique. I hope the Taliban didn't wipe them out. One of the guys who was in the Peace Corps with me, whose aunt was a noted anthropologist who had done research there, told him about that place and then he's the one that told me. That's why I wanted to go there, because it's the real Shangri-La.

COLLINGS:

And did you go there?

CURRY:

Yeah.

COLLINGS:

And what did you see?

CURRY:

It's probably pretty close to being the real Shangri-La.

COLLINGS:

Really? In what way?

CURRY:

Geographically, geologically, and spiritually. People were--I'm sure you've seen Lost Horizon with Ronald Coleman.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, oh, sure.

CURRY:

And hopefully you avoided the musical remake where they summarize Buddhist philosophy in a minute-and-a-half jingle.

COLLINGS:

Oh, no, I didn't even know about that.

CURRY:

Yeah, Peter Finch as Conway. At any rate, yeah, it's those vibes, the people, the place, the kindness, the tolerance. I didn't know anything, I didn't know anybody, couldn't talk to them, and yet there was a connection. Those people, all along there, because, of course, their existence is so difficult, their environment presents so many environmental and survival challenges that their embrasure of the--that they view their real world is their spiritual existence while the temporal physical world is the dream. I think that's like they have a considerable degree of truth from it. Like, I don't practice any formal

religion, I just have evolved my own perceptions of what might be, but still, in the back of my mind, thanks to the influence of the Buddhists, know that I'm probably wrong.

COLLINGS:

Shall we leave it there for today?

CURRY:

Sure. Is that okay?

COLLINGS:

Yeah. (End of June 28, 2019 interview)

SESSION THREE (7/17/2019)

COLLINGS:

Today is July 17th, 2019, Jane Collings interviewing Dan Curry in his home. We just spoke for a moment about how when you were in Thailand and on your trek in Nepal, you absorbed the Buddhist philosophy that everything is an illusion and we are at the center of our own universe and we project our imagination on what we see happening, and that this, in some ways, was an appropriate launching pad for going into the world-making that you did go into.

CURRY:

Yeah, well, because visual effects is an art form to create illusions. In support of stories, visual effects are a means of creating that which cannot be, so the job of the visual effects department is to create

those worlds and to put an environmental context for the stories and the events that the characters are experiencing. It should be noted before we get into our narrative that there's no single hero to Star Trek visual effects, and certainly not me. We had a huge team of people that all worked together, so the success of Star Trek visual effects was a team effort.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, yeah.

0:03:23.7

CURRY:

I was very fortunate to be in a leadership position, so I got to design things and supervise a lot of great artists and design shots. The way things worked was we would start off with a script and I would have these ideas that'd come to mind. A lot of times, I'd do initial drawings right on the back of script pages. Then we would go through and make a budget and then present that to the producers, and when the producers recovered from cardiac arrest upon seeing the numbers, then we would hack away at the script and get it down to a financially acceptable level. What was really interesting was there were basically two categories of visual effects. There were the visual effects that involved actors, and that entailed being on set working with the directors and the director of photography and coming up with ways of shooting the material so that we could actually do something with it later. It would have been unrealistic to expect that every director would be a visual effects expert, and it also would place unnecessary burden on the director of photography to make sure everything was shot in a way we could put it together later on. Shooting visual effects was really fun.

Then there was the other category of visual effects, which were the space shots, that didn't involve actors. When we started Star Trek, shots were done with motion-control miniatures and then everything went to computer-generated imaging later on. I got to imagine space battles, choreograph fleets, design creatures, design alien spacecraft, and design planets and civilizations, even. So it was very rewarding, and that was one of the reasons I stayed with Star Trek for eighteen years. I got a lot of offers to move over and do features, which probably would have been more financially rewarding, but I felt a part of the Star Trek family and that it was something that was very important to me because of the cultural impact Star Trek had on audiences around the world.

COLLINGS:

Well, and as an artisan and inventor, it seems like the kind of work that would be well suited for--

0:05:35.9

CURRY:

Yeah, and it was well suited for me because it was a home where my range of goofy skills had value, and unlike a lot of shows which each department is like a medieval fiefdom never to be violated by another department unless absolutely necessary, Star Trek--it was open and all the department heads all respected each other, so I was an honorary member of the Star Trek art department and they never had any problem with me designing stuff, and the same with the makeup department. So we had the brilliant, possibly the greatest makeup artist ever, Mike Westmore, was on the show, and then we had Herman Zimmerman and Richard James as production designers, and they welcomed my input. That way, I was not just limited to visual effects.

Then, of course, the stunt coordinators, especially Dennis Madalone, AKA "Dennis Danger." My involvement with Star Trek martial arts started with an episode where Worf, our Klingon crew member, was to inherit a primordial bladed weapon from the Klingon culture, and the art department, great guys, great artists, sent down something that looked like a pirate's cutlass with an odd blade attached to it. I've never cared for movie weapons that were not ergonomically sound, and nobody would make a sword like that. I'd been imagining this crescent-like bladed weapon that came to be known as the bat'leth for years, but I never had any reason to make one, but when this episode came down, I made one out of foam core and went to executive producer Rick Berman and said, "Hey, look. Let's do something new and original for the Klingons that never existed before, but is practical for combat." So I showed him some tricks with it and I made up a "kata," a form. Of course, with Rick's inimitable judgment, he said, "Well, if it was two inches shorter, I'd accept it."

COLLINGS:

That's funny. Why two inches shorter?

CURRY:

Rick's philosophy was "Always find fault. It keeps them humble."

COLLINGS:

I see. Okay.

CURRY:

So that's what began the bat'leth. Then, when I first showed it to Dennis Madalone, our wonderful stunt coordinator, possibly one of the most generous people on the planet and one of the kindest people, he said, "This is worthless. We can't do anything with this." Then I started showing him some tricks. He goes, "Oh, okay! We can do that." Then Michael Dorn, the actor who played Worf, really got into it and some of the other actors got into it and it became iconic. One of the stuntmen who doubled for a lot of the actors, Tommy Morga, became one of the bat'leth masters. It was great fun, and that particular weapon was recognized by the Korean Martial Arts Association as one of the only new bladed weapons that had any real value and they approved it for their Martial Arts Association.

COLLINGS:

Oh, how interesting.

CURRY:

The Navy Department of Research sent somebody to talk to me about my ideas about bladed weapon ergonomics. The bat'leth became kind of a big deal, an iconic image always associated with Klingons. When Michael Dorn signed on to Deep Space Nine, I got a funny phone call. I answered the phone and it's Michael, and he said (imitating Dorn's voice), "Daniel, I need a new weapon." So he came over to the house. I showed him my collection of swords. Michael's idea was it had to be cool, powerful enough to take on a bat'leth, but small enough to hide behind his back. So I showed him one of my favorites, a Nepalese Kora sword. I said, "Let's use the blade, the front end," but then everything else was just something that we came up with, and I made a cardboard one. We went out in the backyard and fooled around with it. There were no notes on it from the producers, and that became the mek'leth. So that was one of my martial arts contributions to Star Trek.

COLLINGS:

Was there any thought about what kind of metal these were made of, like perhaps from another planet?

CURRY:

Well, we assumed it would be Klingon alloys, but in practice, they were tempered aluminum and rubber with steel, thin steel core, that they would actually use for fighting so the actors wouldn't hurt each other, and then the sound guys would put in metal clashes so it'd have an acceptable degree of verisimilitude ons creen.

COLLINGS:

Metal clashes, yeah, yeah. So we talked a lot about culture last time, American culture, Thai culture. So when you're doing these weapons for the Klingons, it's part of their culture. I mean, how were you envisioning that?

CURRY:

Well, it's interesting, because Klingon culture changed significantly after the introduction of the bat'leth and the writers picked up on it immediately. In the original series, the Klingons had bushy eyebrows and they were kind of metaphors for Eastern European, Russian Communist totalitarian types.

COLLINGS:

You're talking about the original Star Trek.

CURRY:

The one with Captain Kirk.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, exactly.

CURRY:

So Worf, for a long time, was just subjected to growling, but when this particular episode came along and Michael had the opportunity to show what a wonderful actor he really was, then Klingon culture started to change to become much more Bushido--like a warrior honor culture, and that was something that Michael and I felt we both had a contribution to.

COLLINGS:

You have a lot of other aspects of Klingon culture which were--let's see. Let me get my notes here. Well, I'm just thinking about the martial arts style, in particular mok'bara. Excuse my--

CURRY:

Yeah, mok'bara.

COLLINGS:

Excuse my pronunciation.

CURRY:

Yeah, well, that was something where, based on my own studies of martial arts, I made a combination of Tai chi, which I still practice daily, and Tae Kwon Do and a lesser-known Chinese martial art,

Hung Gar, which is very violent and powerful. The Klingons needed something that was much more vicious than the meditative Tai chi and then adding much more kicking and stuff like that, so that's how mok'bar came into existence. There were certain episodes where we'd see Worf teaching a martial arts class in the series, and when that was happening, Michael and I would work out a routine. Then I would be probably be standing next to the camera or in a place where Michael could see me, so I would be doing the routine and I would be a reference for Michael so he wouldn't forget the complex movements. I thought that was really fun and really cool, and I was very proud to be a part of that.

COLLINGS:

Yes. And you spoke about how one of the things that you liked about being part of the Star Trek universe was the impact that you felt that the show was making on larger culture.

CURRY:

Yes.

COLLINGS:

How do you see that? How would you describe that impact?

CURRY:

Well, that goes back to Gene Roddenberry, the creator of Star Trek, and it began, of course, with The Original Series. What I think Star Trek does is it promises a future where, as a species, we have our act together more so than at present day, and it promises a future where we have conquered poverty, pretty much conquered disease, conquered racism, and we developed a very comfortable relationship with our technology so instead of being something to fear, where I know my generation grew up hiding under our desks to ward off potential nuclear attacks, which would have been eminently effective, no doubt. I think it's that promise of a future where people are free to pursue their best angels so that in the case of the crew of the Enterprise and Voyager and Deep Space Nine and the NX-01, it's all about the human need to explore, discover, satisfy our insatiable thirst for knowledge and the fact that honor--and I think there was something that, attributed to Gene, is the Prime

Directive, and the Prime Directive is basically when we encounter other cultures that are not as industrialized or as technologically advanced as we are, we can interact with them, but not in a way that affects their culture. I think it was Gene's comment on colonialism--

COLLINGS:

Right. Of course, yeah, yeah.

CURRY:

--and I think the Prime Directive is a noble attribute of our species, and I think that's one of the things that we should be continuing to think about, especially as we interact with cultures that have not been as fortunate as us in terms of evolving technologies.

COLLINGS:

You said that you thought that the culture of Star Trek was unique in terms of the larger working model in Hollywood.

CURRY:

Yeah, I would say the fact that it was family.

COLLINGS:

What do you mean, "family"?

CURRY:

Well, we would spend, oh, a minimum of ten hours a day, and, more often than not, sixteen-hour days to get something done. The schedules for production are made by people who don't know how to produce movies, and so they're generally optimistic and impossible on a normal workday. I remember one time when one of the previous governors of California was making a big deal about the eight-hour day, everybody was laughing, and, "When was the last time you saw an eight-hour day?" Each series had its own culture.

COLLINGS:

How would you break those down?

CURRY:

I think it reflects the personality of the show runner and the personality of the captain. On (The) Next Generation, we had the great Patrick Stewart, and Patrick had a very funny sense of humor, very formal, especially with his Royal Shakespeare background. The cast had a special relationship within each other, but they also related to the crew in a very interesting way, and because we spent so much time and there was so much stress trying to get the work done, that there was also a lot of humor that ran all day long to keep things light and bearable. So Next Generation had one culture, and Deep Space Nine came along and Avery Brooks had certain perspective on the reality of life, and Avery's philosophy would certainly spread throughout the show and it raised our awareness of a lot of issues that were important to Avery.

COLLINGS:

What kind of issues were those?

CURRY:

Well, being an African American man, I know I became much more aware of issues that were of concern to him, same as in Next Generation. Michael became a really good friend, but Whoopi

Goldberg, especially, would talk about things that, as an Irish American, the racism that the Irish faced were a couple generations before my time, but I began to be much more aware of that. I think having lived in another culture where I was the only member of my ethnic group around for miles, I was used to being the odd person out and I began to be aware of things in our culture that need improvement, as the current-day politics would make anyone not oblivious to what's going on well aware of. Then Star Trek: Voyager came along, and Kate Mulgrew was such a consummate professional. I never saw her not being prepared. I never saw her not having a truly wonderful relationship with the crew. And the fun we had together, Kate was great to work with, as was everybody else in Voyager, but the captain's personality would really--

COLLINGS:

That's very interesting.

CURRY:

--affect the crew, as the show runner, like--Rick Berman, once Gene passed, was the Grand Poobah of all things Star Trek, but we had Ira Behr on Deep Space Nine and Ira had this really odd sense of humor. For example, Ira, I loved going to his office because he had a coffee table in his office that had an Alamo Playset.

COLLINGS:

An Alamo Playset. That's funny.

CURRY:

They were from Marx, and when I was growing up, Marx made the best playsets. My favorite were the Captain Blood Playset or the Robin Hood Playset.

COLLINGS:

Oh, gosh.

CURRY:

They even went out of their way to make the characters look like Errol Flynn and Basil Rathbone.

COLLINGS:

Right. Captain Blood, that's an amazing film.

CURRY:

It was the best pirate movie ever made, to this day.

COLLINGS:

Ever, yeah.

CURRY:

To this day, none have exceeded it, no matter how much money they throw at them. When we'd have meetings, there was the Alamo setup and then you had the Mexican Army and Davy Crocket and Jim Bowie and these little figures, so during the course of the meeting, people would move the figures around and kind of rearrange them, and it was just all unspoken, just absentmindedly doing it.

COLLINGS:

How nice, how neat.

CURRY:

So that was Ira. Then so many of the writers were really interesting, wonderful people. Then when Star Trek: Enterprise came along, Scott Bakula was the captain, Captain Archer, and Scott was so un-movie star that he wouldn't even have his name on the trailer and he refused to accept any movie star treatment, and Scott's philosophy basically permeated everything on the show and--

COLLINGS:

Oh, that's interesting.

CURRY:

--it made it unique culturally. Each show was like--I guess you would look at it like somebody with four children, and which child do you love the most? Well, you love them all equally, but they were all different and they all have their own personality. Then each show had its kind of core theme going on. Next Generation, we were going to expand human knowledge to go where no one has gone before. Then Deep Space Nine, we were occupying what had once been the equivalent of a Nazi space station, and so we began as being alone out there and that evolved into a hub of activity. On Voyager, we were whisked off by unknown forces into the Delta Quadrant, so Voyager was about going home and encountering all these interesting species on the way back. Then Star Trek: Enterprise was set prior to the original series with Captain Kirk and it was about the first spaceship with warp drive, and so it was basically like Columbus' voyage across the Atlantic or, more likely, the Irish monk who really discovered America or the Norsemen who really discovered America.

COLLINGS:

Now, who was the Irish monk who really discovered America?

CURRY:

Brendan the Navigator.

COLLINGS:

Oh, is that right?

0:25:12.4

CURRY:

So they were the ones that were kind of lost in history, and Columbus was a great self-promoter, and certainly the help of the Spanish crown, and they were much more involved in acquiring riches than cultural improvement, despite how they deluded themselves into thinking that's what they wanted. So the fact that there was a core theme to each show also affected its culture and the main sets affected the culture of each show. The Enterprise that Herman Zimmerman designed was like the best cruise ship in the world. Everything was beautiful. The woodwork was incredible. The spaces were large and very elegant. So when you'd spend time on that set--it's funny, walking on to a movie set or a TV set is very interesting, because from the outside, you see little two-by-two frameworks with plywood on the back, and so it's all unfinished, but as soon as you walk through the door and you're on the set, suddenly you're in another century. When you'd walk on that set--so each set was really two worlds. You had the world inside the set, the world of the future, but then you had the world on the set, which was the world of the crew, the craft service table, the cameras, the lights, all that stuff, and so there were two worlds in one that had this very interesting symbiotic relationship between them. Next Generation had that feel.

Deep Space Nine, the core theme was it was a space station taken over from the Cardassians, who were a very fascist totalitarian race who were all about oppressing people they considered beneath them. Herman and his art department did a brilliant job designing the interior of Deep Space Nine as well as the cool model. But after you spent a few hours on that set, which was intended to be designed by an oppressive culture, it got pretty oppressive after a while because everything was gray.

COLLINGS:

Wow.

0:26:53.50:28:55.2

CURRY:

Even though the humans, as they came on, brightened it up with pendants and color and stuff, it still had that foreboding undercurrent. Armin Shimerman played Quark, the Ferengai bartender, so there's Quark's Bar, and there's a lot of cool stuff. Everybody had interesting relationships. The production design added to the stress of the day unintentionally, it was just the nature of those sets and how big they were. You'd walk in and, wow, the main promenade was two stories and there was all this techno gear. So I think that set would add stress to the course of the day, because after being there for twelve hours, it started to weigh on you.

Voyager, the sets were intentionally--because it was a smaller ship, a more exploratory ship, was Next Generation-lite, but it had a similar feel to the Enterprise 1701-D, that very pleasing, pleasant environment. Then when it came to Star Trek: Enterprise, the NX-01, the first warp drive ship, was intentionally designed to be more like a military ship. Herman and company went and explored U.S. Navy nuclear submarines to get a feel for those tight spaces, and they intentionally made, for example, Captain Archer's ready room with low enough ceilings that Scott had to bend to go around things, to show how valuable space was on earlier spacecraft. When you think about our astronauts, especially the earliest ones, they were in little pods that they couldn't even move around in. They just were trapped in their seats. That was another aspect of what gave each show its unique culture, but collectively, Star Trek had that family culture so that when you walked on to any set, you felt a part of something that was greater than the sum of its parts. I remember after, when we did the premiere screening of Star Trek: Voyager at the main theater at Paramount, walking out of it, Armin Shimerman came up to me and said, "Well, now that you're done with this, get back to Deep Space Nine where you belong." I'm sure Armin wouldn't even remember that statement, but the fact that he chose to use the words "where you belong," it made me feel like, yeah, I belong there.

This day, we still have Star Trek reunions. Last year, the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences gave Star Trek collectively the Governors Award for having artistic and cultural influence on the art and technology of television, and they invited over 100 people from in front and behind the camera. Bill Shatner accepted the award on everybody's behalf. What was the best part about it and why everybody went was before we were called up onstage as a large group, we spent a couple of hours just hanging out together in a large green room, a bar-sized room below the stage, and then going to the Governor's Ball afterwards. Everybody just got a chance to see people we hadn't seen for a long time and catch up and cheer each other on for the advances in their careers, and it also reminded me that we're still family.

COLLINGS:

That's a wonderful experience and probably unique, as you were describing.

CURRY:

Yeah, I think that was unique. I'm sure the Star Wars people feel the same way about their franchise, so it's just--

COLLINGS:

And it did people ever talk about the worldview that the show was promoting and discuss it on the--

CURRY:

Yeah, we did. We talked about it a lot, and especially with the directors when looking for meaning in a scene. What we did--and I feel comfortable speaking for all the supervisors in the visual effects department--we always felt that when we would do the visual effects, whether it was a space shot or somebody beaming out or whatever the effect was, that it existed solely to drive the story, and if it didn't advance the story for, say, even a space shot if it's on for five seconds or three seconds, if the audience didn't-- (recorder turned off)

COLLINGS:

So you were talking about how effects had to serve the story, and I think earlier you had said that one of the most valuable courses you'd had at Humboldt was a script analysis course.

CURRY:

That's true, because script analysis, it's like what's the real meaning in a script. Another thing I learned at Humboldt and from my studying of writing is that much of what really transpires in human communication is in subtext. It's not what people say, but it's the subtext underneath what they say, and that's why we call dialogue that's on the nose less interesting than dialogue that is implicit rather than explicit. But sometimes it has to be on the nose for story purposes, for example, if there's a

dating scene and there's a couple sitting down, the man may say, "Oh, well, that's a wonderful blouse," and the subtext is he really would like to remove it. So that's what great actors instinctively understand, and great actors can communicate a very complex emotion with a look. And, of course, all that is enhanced by the score. I can remember certain episodes where I'd look at the work print before the music had been applied and shake my head and says, "Boy, I'm not sure about this episode." Then when you hear it with the score, suddenly the composers add an emotional context so that the audience understands what's going on, and it's not just suspense or action. There may be a single strain and that might imply tension that you could take the same image and put different scores over it and audiences will completely interpret it in different ways.

COLLINGS:

Oh, yeah, yeah. So how would you determine from looking at the script and through your conferencing with the group where you were going to be bringing your work into articulating the storyline?

CURRY:

Well, a lot of that would begin with the editors when you see the show cut, and there would be a number of cuts. The cut or the way the show is edited evolves, starting with an assembly of just stringing the shots, and then determine what's important, what's not, what's slowing it down, where's it dragging, where's it confusing. Then the editors would slug in or leave spaces for, say, the space shots, because we haven't done them yet, so you'd be watching a show and there'd be a black frame that said "The Enterprise enters orbit around the planet." So then you'd look at what preceded the blank frame and what follows it. One of the things I used to do would be, especially if it's a space battle scene, where Captain Picard might be on set and Patrick would say something and you knew that that's where the audience's eye would be in frame because they were looking at Patrick's face, so then when we'd cut to an exterior space shot with, say, an enemy ship attacking us, I'd make sure the enemy ship was right where Patrick's face was, so that way, there's a shock and viewers would see the attacker right there. You don't have to waste even a nanosecond looking for the next event. And that at the end of the effects shot, something should have transpired that just brings the story a little bit further along so that when we cut back to our human actors, now we know why they're reacting to what they just saw, so that's it's like a relay race where you're passing the baton from one runner to the next.

COLLINGS:

Right, because otherwise the effect is a spectacle that takes you out of the world of the story.

CURRY:

Yeah, and it's for its own aggrandizement, and that was our rule, never for its own sake. I used to have a sign up in my office--I think my colleague Ron Moore came up with it--that said "Good enough is the enemy of excellence." We would always--

COLLINGS:

Oh, that's the reverse of--yeah, yeah.

CURRY:

And sometimes we'd have to settle for good enough because we just ran out of time, but the motto would just remind us--don't settle for something because it's adequate. Try to make it work both artistically and dramatically, storytelling-wise, as best as we can.

COLLINGS:

Do you have an example of a time when you felt like that really came together? I mean, I'm sure there are countless, but--

CURRY:

Oh, it's hard to think of anything specific, but too often we just ran out of time. I know when I was called upon to supervise the effects for the Blu-ray up-res edition of Next Generation for season two, I was pleased because there were a lot of shots that I groaned about. First time around, I would do experiments where I thought I had a good idea, but in retrospect, they were not. For example, in

standard-definition television, it's 720-by-1680 pixels, not super resolution. It's almost like the dots in a newspaper image. I used to not like watching the stars bounce from scan line to scan line. They would always move around. So I said, "Well, how could we fix that?" Then I had heard that for beer commercials, they would shoot beer pours at sixty frames per second so there'd be a new film frame for every video field, and for every video frame, you see the same image refreshed twice. Normally, to convert twenty-four-frames-per-second film recording to thirty-frames-per-second TV recording, they would do something called "3-2 pull down," because the math didn't quite work, so every so many frames, there'd be what was called a "jitter frame," which was kind of a mess. So there would be one film frame from either side of the jitter frame for each refreshing--so it was kind of ratty-looking. So I said, "Well, let me try that sixty frames per second." So I did, and it conquered the stars bouncing from scan line to scan line, but it didn't look right in the context of the other photography, because suddenly you'd get to a space shot and it was startlingly clear, and so I realized--

COLLINGS:

You had to--oh, how painful.

CURRY:

So every once in a while, I'd kick myself. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but in reality, it was a bad idea. But you learn from your mistakes.

COLLINGS:

Yeah. You had said that in terms of building narrative and using effects, you take personal pride in the title sequences of Voyager and Enterprise.

CURRY:

Well, actually, not Enterprise. I designed those for Deep Space Nine and Voyager.

COLLINGS:

The title sequences?

CURRY:

Right.

COLLINGS:

Oh, okay, all right.

0:41:02.00:43:59.4

CURRY:

I'd done a lot of title sequences for movies and the producers of Star Trek were well aware of that, especially supervising producer in charge of post-production, Peter Lauritson, who used to be, before he joined Star Trek, the vice president at Paramount in charge of all television post production, so I did a lot of movies with him, and so he was well aware that was one of the skills I'd brought to the party. So when Deep Space Nine came along, Rob Legato was the VFX supervisor of the pilot. We had split the VFX teams, and so Rob took over DS Nine and I stayed with Next Generation. Rob was so swamped with the demands of the visual effects for the pilot that Peter said, "You design it."

I had seen sketches of the space station, and Tony Meininger, the brilliant model maker who built the hero models of the Deep Space Nine space station, which were about 6 feet in diameter, had made a rough plywood mockup painted gray that we could bring onto our motion-control stage so we could make sure that the model mounts would work and how we would flip it over when we'd have to shoot the bottom. That was on the motion control stage, so I took one of my colleagues, Eddie Williams, with me and a home video camera. I just kept walking around the mock-up station. There were so many beautiful aspects of it that I felt a ballet around the station would be the best thing, where we'd start far away and we'd get closer and closer and see more details, and then there'd be surprises, like the wormhole appearing. One of the surprises I wanted was we'd see the Deep Space Nine space station in the distance when the main title card appeared, and then I had one of their regular ships, the Runabout, fly in front of the title card so that it was like an object floating in space. That title card I actually airbrushed on paper. I took two layers of paper: light proof black paper, and then the white paper I did the airbrushing on mounted on a piece of glass and then cut away everything but the logo, and because it was on glass, I could frontlight/backlight it to get a mat or a silhouette so we could put it in the background. The theme the producers wanted about the Deep Space Nine title was that we are

alone out there in a remote part of space, deep space. A few seasons later, as the stories evolved, now Deep Space Nine had become a hub of activity, and so I redesigned the sequence, added some new shots, got the great John Knoll from ILM to do some spacemen for us, and there were more ships coming and going. Some of the shots were the same, but some were new. Composer, Dennis McCarthy, changed the--it was basically the same theme, but it had a new arrangement that was a little peppier and a little bit more aggressive. With those title sequences, the music is so important to lend majesty and significance to the images that you're seeing.

Then when Voyager came along, the producers were really busy with features and they had several series going on, so basically I had the opportunity to do my own dream of space travel.

COLLINGS:

Okay. Which was?

CURRY:

Which is the title sequence and what I would like to see, where I would like to go. We worked with Santa Barbara Studios, who had just been doing a--they had done a science documentary exploring the planets of our solar system, and one of the shots in there had their virtual camera cross the rings of Saturn. I said, "Well, I've got to do that." They had a wonderful storyboard artist at Santa Barbara Studios, Eric Tiemens, and he helped me with some of the storyboards. Then I worked with supervisor David Stipes, who I was able to bring on to Star Trek. David and I had first met at Universal on Buck Rogers and the original Battlestar Galactica, where I was one of the matte artists and David was one of the matte cameramen. David had this incredible wealth of knowledge, especially old-school-style visual effects, and David is another one of those incredibly kind, moral people that was amazingly generous with how he would share his knowledge. So David was very important to shooting stuff for it. The title sequence was that cool dream of encountering strange phenomena in space, and because we're in the Delta Quadrant, we could depict all sorts of weird things, like the ice moon and phenomena like that. I'm sure you've seen it.

COLLINGS:

Yes.

CURRY:

It's funny, when we first had our first version of putting it all together with the title cards over it, we were showing it to the executive producer and supervising producer and that shot came up where we see Voyager going through clouds of gas and making turbidity happen and one of our executive producers said, "That shot is beyond loathing. I hate that shot." I said, "Well, we're kind of out of time. I believe in it and I think that's a great shot."

COLLINGS:

What was the objection?

CURRY:

Taste, taste. So in a desperate attempt to save it, I rounded up a bunch of people from the office and brought them in and ran the sequence again and they all said, "Wow, I love that shot!" So many people loved that shot that the producer finally relented and left it in, but that was the shot that almost didn't make it. That title sequence is interesting because it's a hybrid of technology. Some of the shots are done with motion-control miniatures, some of the planets I actually painted on cardboard.

COLLINGS:

That's great.

CURRY:

And other planets are CG or 2.5D, and sometimes the ship is CG. It was like putting steam engines on sailing ships.

COLLINGS:

What a great hybrid that sequence is then. You seem to take a lot of delight in sort of the hands-on sculptural aspect of effects.

CURRY:

Yeah, I think that goes back to childhood. My grandfather, he was a retired plumber, Charles G. Rattler, and he had a little workshop in the basement. He lived with us. My brother and I loved to go down with him into the shop and he'd show us how to use tools and we could make all this stuff. Even to this day, when I'm feeling grumpy about something, I'll make something out of wood and suddenly I feel better. So that was, for me personally, one of the most rewarding aspects of Star Trek. I got to use all my goofy skills. I got to make stuff out of wood; I got to make stuff out of plastic; I got to make models; I got to do paintings; I got to do martial arts; got to direct second unit, tell actors what to do. What's not to like?

COLLINGS:

Teach martial arts?

CURRY:

So what's not to like? It's funny, the last project I did was for 21st Century Fox, a Marvel superhero show called The Gifted, and it was about mutants that had special powers and an underground militia group that tried to oppress them. The militia had these little robots called sentinels, and that curl up into a ball and roll around. They were beautifully done in CG, and they were very expensive. There was one shot where our hero people were looking at something from a surveillance camera on a monitor where one of those little robots was to roll across the edge of frame. It was onscreen for maybe two seconds at the most. I was looking at the budget and the CG house wanted $8,000 to do that shot.

COLLINGS:

Wow.

CURRY:

"Eight thousand dollars!" So I looked at the robot and it's just like a rolling piece of tumbleweed, almost, and so I took some white foam core and tape and just cut it up with an X-ACTO knife and made a physical model about eight, ten inches across, and took a piece of blue screen material, laid it on the floor of the parking lot and then rolled the model across it. Because it was white and the blue screen was a different color, you could extract it and get its silhouette and then in compositing you could change its color so it was dark. And because it was always moving, it had natural motion blur, so you never got a good look at it anyway. It took me maybe an hour to make the model and fifteen minutes to shoot it rolling across a piece of blue screen, and when the producers and writers saw the composite, they went, "Wow, that's really good! How much was that?" And I said, "It was free." "How could that be?" I held up the model and they couldn't believe it. So sometimes the old-school methods really work.

COLLINGS:

Do the younger people coming up today know how to do that? Or if they did know how to do that, would they be allowed to or would they need to have all of the gravitas that you would bring to--

CURRY:

Well, their first answer is the computer. Another example was on Chuck, the spy comedy for NBC starring Zack Levi and Yvonne Strahovski. They had glasses with little computers built into the arms, and there's a scene where something goes wrong and they take off the glasses. We look at it and we see a puff of smoke coming out. So one of my compositors, an excellent digital artist, Michael Davidson, said, "It'll take me a couple of days to do the particle animation." And I said, "Ah, Michael, you don't have to do that." He quotes me all the time: "Nothing's more real than real." So I took a piece of black velvet, taped it up on the wall, and I remembered that when I was a kid, my father used to amuse us by sliding the cellophane wrapper down on a pack of cigarettes, burn a hole in it, blow smoke into it and tap the bottom. Puffs of smoke would come out, sometimes in perfect rings.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, oh, really?

CURRY:

So I took a couple of desk lamps and cross-lit it, and I took a plastic box that pushpins came in and found somebody who smoked and had him burn a hole in the pushpin box, blow smoke in it, and then I took it and set my iPhone up on a--I taped it to the back of a chair so it wouldn't move and just shot with the iPhone and tapped little puffs of smoke coming out, and in twenty minutes, I had something that was better than particle animation for that context. Michael, the compositor, always talks about that story because it never would have occurred to him to do that because they always think computer first.

COLLINGS:

It's interesting that he always talks about it, like this was a real moment of realization.

CURRY:

Yeah, it was some kind of epiphany for him.

COLLINGS:

Yes, yes. So apparently that's a lost art.

CURRY:

It's not completely lost, but it's going away as computer technology is better and better and things go faster and faster, and the rendering times get faster and faster, but there'll always be room for old-school techniques because sometimes they work better. Another time on Chuck we needed a shot

where Chuck and another character bail out of an airplane. We had the actors hang on wires in front of a blue screen. I happened to have one of those really nice model planes that the airlines have, so I just held that up in the air and just took a still of it, and then in compositing, moved it along its own lines of perspective. Because the audience is watching the two actors in freefall and you see this small plane moving in the distance, there was never any doubt that that was not a real plane.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So your childhood growing up watching the movies that you described earlier certainly played a role in your future career, no question.

CURRY:

And also playing with toys. I was always the camera watching movies of toys rather than--and so, say, if I'm holding a toy plane and move it around. That's how we would design shots on Star Trek. I'd have a toy Enterprise or make a little foam core version of a ship and just kind of, "Oh, that's what I want it to do, yeah." Then that's how we would do it.

COLLINGS:

Do you have time today to speak a little bit about how you would evolve creatures?

CURRY:

Sure.

COLLINGS:

You had said at a certain point that you would think of them as sort of evolving in an evolutionary sense.

CURRY:

Yeah, the Darwinian approach.

COLLINGS:

The Darwinian approach, right.

CURRY:

I call it. There's no real name for it. When designing creatures, I use what I call the Darwinian approach. It comes from a story I read about Charles Darwin on some remote island in the South Pacific. Wandering about, he saw a specific flower that had an odd shape. He imagined that for a bird to drink its nectar, it would have to have a beak of a certain shape and it would have to be able to hover a certain way, so he drew a picture of it. A few days later, they found a bird that looked remarkably like Charles Darwin's sketch. It always reminded me that when you're designing a creature, you have to start by thinking about the environment that that creature would live in rather than just coming up with a creature that's cool, but why does it look that way. On Voyager, we had an episode called "Basics: Part 1 and 2," where the evil Kazons maroon our crew on a Neolithic planet and they encounter a cave-dwelling creature. I imagine, okay, if a creature lived in a cave and there were vertical tunnels and horizontal tunnels, it would slither about, but it needed a way to grip the walls, so instead of having four feet below its body. I imagined it would be more radial so that it would have a belt of claws that it could scurry its way through, but I also felt it would have an inflatable bladder like a blowfish so that when it wanted to rest or hold position within a vertical shaft, it could blow itself up and just friction would hold it in place. Then it would have an extendable neck that it could--like certain dinosaurs have, could reach out and snap up prey. So that's where that creature came from, and then we did that in CG. So that's how I like to design them, considering what kind of atmosphere. Is it from a heavy-gravity planet? Then it would need a more massive skeletal structure and possibly more elephantine proportions, where if it came from a low-gravity environment, it could have a much more spindly design than if--we had on Enterprise, we had the Xindi, which had--

COLLINGS:

Yes, I was going to ask you about that.

1:00:31.61:03:20.3

CURRY:

So the Xindi had several sentient species on the planet. They had mammalians, humanoids, insectoids, aquatics, and an extinct species of avians. The reptilians, the mammalians, and the humanoids were played by human actors, and, of course, Michael Westmore did a brilliant job with designing the makeup for them. Costume designer, Bob Blackman, another genius we were blessed to have on the show, came up with incredible costumes, especially for the reptilians. The insectoids--now that CG technology had gotten to the point that we could have CG creatures that were clearly not a man in a suit, and so for the insectoids, insects have little tiny connecting points between their segments, and so, to me, it needed to be a CG creature. I was inspired by the head of ants, who I always view as intelligent insects. Insects breathe through holes in their sides. We were originally going to do six legs, like an insect, but then realized it would be, cost-wise, impossible because it would require that many more things to animate. So we assumed that they evolved out their middle appendages when they started to walk vertically.

So I did some sketches and then worked with one of the most brilliant creature designers, an animator, John Teska, so John did a CG version of my sketch that was great. We couldn't afford motion capture, both for the amount of time it consumed on set and the cost of getting a motion-capture rig on set, so I had the idea that we would use a stand-in. Usually, it was one of regular our stand-ins named Evan English. The wardrobe department made suits for the stand-ins with grids on them, like graph paper. Then I made claws for the suits so that they would match the insectoid proportions--they were attached to gloves so the actors could move them. Then the actor wore a hood, like a ski hood, with only his eyes showing. My idea was that the director and actors could actually get a performance out of the stand-in in the grid suit. We would shoot a reference take with the stand-in. That way, the animator, usually John Teska, could see the perspective, because of the grid, so he could match action. Then we would shoot a clean plate without the stand-in, and the actors would have seen or interacted with the stand-in, so then they would just pretend he was there. Scott Bakula was great at doing that, because he would work out the action with the stand-in, and then his performance would be perfect. Never once was there a problem with one of Scott's performances. So that was how we solved that problem. Then another time when they were sitting in chairs--There's something called a bounding box, which is a three-dimensional rectilinear shape like a cube, for example. So one time we needed one and I hot-glued a bunch of chopsticks together from the craft service table and put the bounding box on a chair. That way, as the camera moved around, the animators could see--they knew what the size of the bounding box was, so they could track the corners, and then they would know how the perspective would shift, so they could perfectly integrate of the CG creature into a moving camera shot.

There was another creature on Enterprise called the aquatics, and I felt since they had a technology and they had their own spaceships, that they needed opposable thumbs. So the general body shape I got from a Mosasaur, a Cretaceous period aquatic dinosaur, but I gave it a more intelligent-looking face and arms. Is tail had finned flippers kind like a Mosasaur, so it could swim. Its large arms would give it the ability to manipulate tools and have a technological culture. Then working with another

brilliant animator, David Morton, who created the CG creature based on my sketches. Another artist, Eric Hans, did the rigging. Inside any CG creature, there has to be a skeleton so that you can animate the skeleton and then the creature performs. Then there are things like subsurface scattering, where there's always a little bit of transparency in the skin, so light has to be able to go through that a little bit, otherwise it looks like plastic. I loved the opportunity to work with such brilliant artists, and yet I got to design cool stuff. I mean, what's not to like?

COLLINGS:

Yeah. I mean, who could ask for more than that? I mean, did you ever sit down and actually watch the shows?

CURRY:

Well, I'd always watch them when they were on.

COLLINGS:

You would?

CURRY:

Well, yeah. You had to because you were going to talk about it, see what worked, see what didn't. While working on an episode, we would never see it with the final sound effects until broadcast time. Every once in a while, I'll watch a rerun of a favorite episode now and again.

COLLINGS:

So what are favorite episodes?

CURRY:

Oh, there are so many.

COLLINGS:

So many, yeah.

CURRY:

Each series had favorite episodes. I would say on Next Generation, "Yesterday's Enterprise," "Q Who?" where we first are introduced to the Borg. The Next Generation finale is a favorite, where we got to recreate primordial Earth before life was formed on it.

COLLINGS:

Oh, yeah, that's great.

CURRY:

There are a lot of great ones on Deep Space Nine. "Sacrifice of Angels." I got to work again with David Stipes, big space battle scene. Voyager had some great episodes. The pilot was really fun. In that one, we went into the Badlands. The Badlands were an area with fire tornados, and at that time, Universal Studio tours had the Backdraft show, where audiences would go into a fireproof building and experience fire doing all this cool stuff. Our special effects supervisor, Dick Brownfield, was friendly with the people at Universal and arranged for us to go before the park opened. The fire technicians showed the camaraderie within the industry by people willing to share what they know. So we went in and they showed us by creating baffles and vents, how they were able to have controllable fire tornados. Then we shot some of those on our set and we used real fire tornados in those Badlands.

COLLINGS:

Wow.

CURRY:

In another episode, we went back in time to World War II where aliens were helping the Nazis, and we were going to blow up a building. We shot at the European area of Universal's backlot, which has been used since the 1930s. They shot Frankenstein there. We brought in Ron Moore's friend, who's one of the great pyro technician, named Thaine Morris. We built a 15-foot miniature matching one of the buildings on the Universal backlot. Thaine and his crew lined it with primer cord, black powder and bags of gasoline, and we blew that up, shooting it at high speed to slow down time. Then we put a blue screen out on set, on the location, and shot Kate Mulgrew and Jeri Ryan running away from it. We then had lighting effects where director of photography, Marvin Rush, had these yellow light shutters so that suddenly they'd be bathed in yellow light. We would sync the light flash and explosion together so that they would look like they're running away, barely escaping from this gigantic explosion, which was all done with miniatures. The pilot of Star Trek: Enterprise was great. The finale was great. Yeah, there's so many episodes I really loved.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, what's not to love, from the way you describe it. Okay, let me pause for a second. (End of July 17, 2019 interview)

SESSION FOUR (8/6/2019)

COLLINGS:

Today is August 6th, 2019, Jane Collings interviewing Dan Curry in his home, and we're going to start today by talking about--

CURRY:

The symbiotic relationship between science fiction and real science.

COLLINGS:

Right.

CURRY:

It's something I've always been aware of, and some years ago, some people, especially a man named David Beaver, contacted me to see if I would represent the Overview Institute in Madrid, Spain. It was for the European Space Agency. They were having a huge meeting with people from all over. It was like the U.N. Everybody had earphones with live translators.

COLLINGS:

How interesting.

CURRY:

There were scientists from all over the world, and I guess I was the comic relief. I did an hour-and-a-half presentation starting with early literature and that science fiction or speculative fiction, as some people call it, has always been a part of human storytelling, and if you look at Beowulf, it's basically a science fiction story. There was a--

COLLINGS:

In what sense?

0:02:05.9

CURRY:

Well, it was a monster movie. It's about monsters, and so it's about humans interacting with things that don't exist, so therefore it's speculative fiction. There was a famous story written by Apuleius, a Roman author, called The Golden Ass. Some people might think it was a prophetic vision of our current president (Donald J. Trump), but it was about a man who is magically transformed into a donkey and winds up being an animal that has to work in the arena with gladiators and searches to get back into human form.

Japanese Noh plays, which came about during the most violent civil wars in medieval Japan, when artists and writers got into very esoteric things like haiku. One of the art forms invented was Noh theatre, which is very, very formal. It's done on a special type of stage and it takes actors years to even learn how to walk the correct way. Most of these stories have science fiction themes. One of them is like a science fiction piece, where energy comes from space and starts turning villagers into mushrooms and how they deal with that. It's like H.P. Lovecraft's "The Color Out of Space," which was made into an atrocious film in the fifties. Then I went discussed early films and, of course, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, and then into Georges MÃ©liÃ¨s' (A Trip) Voyage to the moon. Not only was he telling a science fiction epic, but he was also inventing the language of cinema and the language of the science fiction epic, including matte paintings, forced perspective miniatures, the dissolve, the double exposure, all this cool stuff. In that film, a bunch of French explorers go to the moon. They're walking around in top hats without oxygen equipment. As science made discoveries and it would change science fiction, and then when somebody would dream of something in science fiction, it would spark a real scientist to say, "Well, what about that?" Then if you look at Fritz Lang's Woman On The Moon, same thing, they're just walking around without oxygen masks. Or in Rocketship XM, they go to Mars and just wear little oxygen masks like you might get on an airplane. So each of those art forms--and I consider science an art form, in a way--contribute to each other. If you consider the flip phone came from the original Star Trek, Captain Kirk's phones, and then on Next Generation, we had Padds, and they became the iPad.

COLLINGS:

Here's a nice picture of a grouping of the gadgets.

CURRY:

There we are, yeah. So now the tricorder is one of the X Prizes, and if somebody can come up with a real tricorder.

COLLINGS:

What is the tricorder then?

CURRY:

The tricorder was a device that could analyze anything. "Hey, break out the tricorder," and then they would measure what chemicals are inside something or why somebody is sick, what microorganisms are in them.

COLLINGS:

Oh, right, right, of course.

CURRY:

So it's like a portable analyzer of anything you wanted to analyze.

COLLINGS:

And what is happening with the X Prize in that respect?

CURRY:

Well, the X Prize was--if somebody can come up with a real medical tricorder, they will get the X Prize.

COLLINGS:

So it's specifically referencing the tricorder. Okay, all right.

CURRY:

Yes, absolutely, and they call it the tricorder. After the event in Spain, because there were a bunch of NASA scientists and I got to meet them, we did several programs together where it'd be me and several NASA scientists on a panel--I would start off with the history of that relationship and then the NASA scientists would talk about how science fiction inspired them to pursue real science. Then I would say, "Okay. Please send me pictures from the Hubble Telescope." It changed how I would do nebula and galaxies.

COLLINGS:

Oh, is that right?

CURRY:

Their discoveries would change how we would do things and then sometimes we would inspire them to try something else. Even the way we would choreograph a space battle. I remember I was invited to be part of the NASA Vision Team talking about what future bandwidth would be required for how filmmaking would evolve and make demands on communications satellites. And for me, I was totally geeked out. I got to go to NASA Headquarters with all those really brilliant scientists, and they were geeked-out because they got to hang out with somebody from Star Trek.

COLLINGS:

Can you think of a particular exchange that was--

CURRY:

Well, yeah. I remember I was sitting next to one of NASA's top scientists and he texted during a big meeting. I was talking about future filmmaking, and that we don't use physical film anymore. You can have several teams shooting simultaneously in different parts of the world, and as resolution expands, then you need bigger and bigger bandwidth because the images require that many more pixels, and speculating on how much just the film industry would demand of the communications satellites to send data back and forth around the world. So you might have an editor and a post-production team here in L.A., but somebody might be shooting in Zimbabwe, you might have another team in Greenland, and all the stuff going on, yet the data has to flow, and since you don't have to ship cans of physical film anymore, NASA will be integrally involved with the film industry.

COLLINGS:

That's interesting, yeah.

CURRY:

Kind of like shipping containers on large cargo ships or on railroads, getting stuff from one place to another. So at any rate, I was sitting next to a scientist when he texted his daughter and said, "You wouldn't believe who I'm sitting next to," and told his daughter who I was. He showed me her response, "Don't geek-out." I still maintain good relationships with people from NASA. I mean, they're the real deal. They're the ones that are inventing the future for us, and so much of what is required for space exploration became part of everyday life that average people don't understand. The need for miniaturization made iPhones possible and smartphone possible and so much medical technology. When I hear people say, "It's a waste of time to do that," it's like, "Well, look what's in your pocket right now. Do you like that phone? Do you like your flat-screen TV?"

COLLINGS:

"Did you learn something from your MRI recently?"

CURRY:

Yeah. Well, from my MRI?

COLLINGS:

Well, I thought that MRI technology had come in some way from--

CURRY:

Yeah, all that stuff, because they have to analyze keeping humans as safe as possible in space and that presents so many challenges. If you look at science fiction films today even compared to the fifties, but without the pioneering work of the artists in the fifties, we wouldn't have the films of today, which is why I find anybody who is an evolution denier willfully ignorant, because, I mean, look at automobiles from the first ones to the ones we drive now. That's evolution. It's technical evolution, and why would not biological entities experience those same issues of trial and error and selective breeding, that things that work better survive and things that don't are gone.

COLLINGS:

Right, right. So how did that work lead into--first of all, what is the Overview Institute?

CURRY:

The Overview Institute is a collection of scientists and writers and interesting people. There are many wonderful people involved, Frank White, Kevin Kelley, a wonderful writer, who wrote The Home Planet. David Beaver is one of the spearheads of it. Douglas Trumbull, the great visual effects and

artist and director, Doug did 2001, among other great films, the first Blade Runner. It basically studies the effect on people getting into space and looking back and seeing Earth from a distance. That's the overview. What happens when people get in space--and all the astronauts experience this. I had a chance to talk to Buzz Aldrin and he said absolutely, and apparently the Russian cosmonauts and whoever else gets into space all have that same experience that when you realize that there's this one jewel floating in the vast void of darkness of space and all borders are imaginary lines drawn on maps by human beings, but there are no borders. You can't see them from space. They don't exist. So it reminds me that so many of our human conflicts and our divisions are imposed upon reality by the imaginations of power-hungry human beings.

COLLINGS:

So they're living in an illusion.

CURRY:

Well, we are all living in an illusion, and that the overview reminds us how precious our planet is, how unique it is, and as far as we know, we may be the only intelligent species. It's unlikely, given the vastness of the universe, but how far away they are, makes it irrelevant, until they land here. So the Overview Effect is basically the institute promotes that understanding and, in a way, it promotes world peace and world harmony because reminding us that we're all one thing. Living on this Earth is really a spaceship.

COLLINGS:

Yes, oh, yes, yes.

CURRY:

And that's where we are, and if we don't take care of it--that's why I find climate deniers are basically thinking against their own best interests, because this is it, and it's just like, say, if you live in a remote area, you don't use your well as your outhouse, and that's what we're doing now.

COLLINGS:

There's a lot that's been said and written about the impact of that first image of the Earth from space--

CURRY:

That's right.

COLLINGS:

--its impact in sort of helping to coalesce the environmental movement and the--

CURRY:

And one of the most powerful images. Well, going back to science fiction, well, if you look at, say, War of the Worlds and other films like from the great producer George Pal, Earth seen from space is a painting by the great space illustrator, Chesley Bonestell, who designed what the surface of the moon would look like, and he would speculate about technology. His work influenced science fiction for generations and he should be revered.

COLLINGS:

You were talking about the great illustrator. We were talking about the impact of that first image of the Earth from space.

CURRY:

Oh, that first image. So then when we saw what it really looked like, it changed everything. I can remember the first time I saw that photograph of the Earth over the moon.

COLLINGS:

Oh, really? You actually remember that?

CURRY:

Oh, I can remember the exact moment of it. I was in the Peace Corps and it was published in the paper, and that was like "That's really what it looks like," because I'd always imagined it as those Chesley Bonestell paintings. There's one in the opening of War of the Worlds, the George Pal version, and that's it. Somehow, I think that photo affected the human consciousness of anybody who saw it. That that's where we live and it's a little ball that can be seen from a distance, and we really have to think about our existence collectively with every other living thing on the planet and all our resources together as one entity. It's like the old Gaia theory of Earth being a living organism, and, in a way, it is.

COLLINGS:

Yeah.

CURRY:

It's like if you consider a cell in your fingernail, it's not aware that you might be contemplating string theory and quantum physics, but it's there and part of you, and we are part of a larger collective consciousness that we can't access. Some people have built imaginary projections upon it which became religions. But there is a sum total energy, like if you consider an insect colony, say a colony of termites or ants, well, each individual ant is there, but the real entity is the collective consciousness of the hive. So I suspect that there is a sum total of the life energy of all things on the planet and that is its own entity, but it's so separate from us that we are to it like a cell in our fingernail is to our most profound cogitations.

COLLINGS:

That's interesting, too, to think about all the satellites now around the Earth that are basically sending electrical signals all around, so it becomes almost like a brain.

CURRY:

Oh, yeah, that's remarkable. Yeah, and if you think about it, the data that's going through us right now, that's in the air, all the TV channels, the radio channels, the other communications, it's amazing, and that you consider people like Marconi, who invented radio, how his mind had to be so open to the idea that we can send things in a non-physically perceivable way. That's led to the age we're in. And you think about what we imagined the future would be--say, going back to the iPad, well, imagining our PADDs on Star Trek we thought could do all sorts of cool stuff, but the real iPad is way cooler than what we thought would be available in the twenty-fourth century. We invented a paperless culture, because there's no room for paper on a spaceship, so there's only one book on the Enterprise that Captain Picard had in a glass case in his ready room, a copy of Shakespeare.

COLLINGS:

Of course he has to have that.

CURRY:

Well, of course, had to be because of Patrick. So imagining if we are able to sustain ourselves and make wise decisions, the future, say, centuries from now will be as strange to us as our world would to a Neanderthal hunter.

COLLINGS:

Indeed.

CURRY:

It's too bad we can't hang around to see what happens.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, it is too bad. Did you say that you had actually spoken with Buzz Aldrin--

CURRY:

Yes.

COLLINGS:

--and some other astronauts who spoke about that impression of being outside of the Earth? What was that conversation like?

CURRY:

Well, I first met Buzz and Neil Armstrong in 1969, and they were--

COLLINGS:

What was the occasion of the meeting?

CURRY:

Well, it's a funny story. I was in the Peace Corps and I was working upcountry in Khon Kaen Province, and every once in a while, the Peace Corps would order several of us to come down and have the Peace Corps doctor check us over to make sure we didn't have parasites and were doing okay, so we had been summoned to Bangkok. Having lived out in villages with no electricity, we didn't see any of the moon landing. We knew about it, but we hadn't seen any images of it. The director of the Peace Corps at the time was a wonderful man named Francis F.X. Delany.

COLLINGS:

F.X.

CURRY:

Francis Xavier. Kevin F.X. Delany, rather, said, "Hey, there's a special event at the embassy tonight for the astronauts. They're doing an around-the-world tour after the moon mission to publicize what they did, and would you like to go?" We'd been out eating barbecued field rat and chicken embryos and said, "Really, food?" We had all been advised to grow our hair really long because if we'd been captured by the Pathet Lao, the theory was you could tell them you were a hippie and they'd let you go.

COLLINGS:

Who told you to grow your hair long?

CURRY:

People in the Peace Corps, and it didn't work.

COLLINGS:

That was just part--

CURRY:

Because we were up near the Lao border sometimes and they would come over to capture American prisoners so hey could get them for trade. One of our friends spent two years in a bamboo cage. He was captured.

COLLINGS:

Oh, jeez. So this was just word on the street? It wasn't official Peace Corps?

CURRY:

No, no, but we all looked like scavengers from the Old West. We didn't have good clothes. Once we saw that it was all dignitaries and lots of Thai military officers with medals and lots of American military and diplomats and such, so we grabbed our food and hid in the corner. While we're eating, a guy with really short hair who looked incredibly physically fit comes over and carrying a tray and says, "Hey, can I eat with you guys? I'm tired of these dignitaries." "Sure." So he sits down and I'm trying to figure out, "Who is this guy? He must be new in country because he looks too healthy and he's got short hair." Finally, somebody at the table figured out who it was. A Peace Corps volunteer named Don Cooksey said, "How was the moon, anyway?" It was Neil Armstrong--

COLLINGS:

Wow!

CURRY:

--and he started to talk about his experience. That was, amazingly enough, although I didn't have a name for it, when I began to sense the Overview Effect, because he said something that always stuck with me. He said he wished that one of them was artistic or poetic, so they could really communicate how profound and life-changing that experience was of standing on the moon and looking back at the Earth. And he said their every moment was valuable and it was all designed so they really didn't have time to think about the profundity of the event until they were on their way home. Then Buzz Aldrin came over and I just spoke with him for a couple of minutes. A few years ago, a wonderful producer, Rupert Hitzig, was developing a miniseries based on a novel that Buzz Aldrin had co-written, and that takes place over a span of 10,000 years--

COLLINGS:

Oh, really?

CURRY:

--about aliens that had come to Earth during Neolithic times, then there's a revolt by the humans, who had been enslaved by the aliens. Then the aliens escape back to their home world, but they leave something on the moon that's an archive of--like the encyclopedia of that alien civilization. Then in the near future, our astronauts discover it and decide to go on a mission to the alien planet. It's a wonderful thing. So Rupert asked me would I be interested in getting involved to help develop that series. I'm amazed we haven't been able to find a buyer for it--

COLLINGS:

I am too.

CURRY:

--especially considering some of the stuff I've been watching of late--

COLLINGS:

Yeah, exactly.

CURRY:

--"quality" would not be the first term that comes to mind, but yet it is what it is. So I helped design some of the characters. I designed the logo with the idea that if we get it going, I would help them develop a pipeline for visual effects and image quality. So I had the opportunity to spend some time with Buzz Aldrin, who is a real global hero, and he's an interesting person.

COLLINGS:

In what sense?

CURRY:

Well, he's got a very big personality and he's quite brilliant, and it's kind of awesome to be around somebody who accomplished what he did. In Peace Corps later on, when Kevin Delany left, he was replaced with another lunar astronaut, Don Isley, who I had the chance to talk to a few times about his experiences going to the moon, and I think subconsciously that must have all ultimately fed into Star Trek--

COLLINGS:

Well, yeah, sure.

CURRY:

--as did my studies of martial arts and looking at Asian architecture and stuff like that.

COLLINGS:

Sure, sure, yeah. So getting back to the Overview Institute, what is sort of the mission of this group?

CURRY:

Education. Just to educate people, and especially by the great filmmaker Douglas Trumbull, who's invented other forms of image projection and technologies like that, basically to go around and get as many people who live on Earth and will never get the opportunity to go into space to vicariously experience that, learn from, and share with the people who have been in space that profound epiphany of perception that we have this one very precious planet and we're all on it together. It's like we're in a lifeboat at sea and we have to work together to--

COLLINGS:

Yes, that's a good way of putting it. It's a lifeboat.

CURRY:

And it is, it's our lifeboat.

COLLINGS:

So you're in sort of the unique position of somebody who has worked in the entertainment industry innovating special effects, but with a context that is much broader than that, where it's almost like there's a cultural mission behind the work.

CURRY:

That's true. I guess I've had life experiences that are a little bit different than the mainstream, but it seemed like a good idea at the time.

COLLINGS:

But I guess what I'm saying is that when you're sort of working on this show for these eighteen years and innovating different kinds of visual effects, as you discussed last time and have discussed in other contexts, you have an interest in sort of the broader cultural impact of what you're doing.

0:28:38.9

CURRY:

Yeah, I think that's why--you know, I had opportunities to leave Star Trek and go to other companies. One company was trying to get me to work for them. They said, "Well, we're going off to do the big Oscar-winning big movies," tentpole films and stuff. I was tempted and I had personal reasons why I didn't want to do that, but also I felt Star Trek was important, and that even though it was less money and less prestige, it may have had a longer life, in its own way. But I felt that there was a mission to not just the fans, but to audiences in general to support that promise that as a species we can get our act together, how important it is, and that the promise that we can create a world where people are free to pursue what works for them and to find their own meaning in existence. That's only achievable when we've conquered poverty, conquered disease, and conquered petty warfare. That's one of the reasons.

I also like the pace of television. Features are a marathon. You can spend a year, two years, sometimes more, on a feature, and Star Trek, you have so many weeks and then there's the air date, and it was like running sprints, and I like that fast pace. I like the fact that you finish an episode, you move on, and you learn from your mistakes, of which mine were many.

COLLINGS:

So you're running a series of experiments, in essence.

CURRY:

It was like a constant series of experiments with really cool toys and cool technology and being part of telling a bigger story, and that serving the stories was our main goal. I used to have a sign up in my office--it probably came from Ron Moore, one of my colleagues--that said "Good enough is the enemy of excellence." We would always avoid--say, when working on a shot trying to get it done. Video technology allowed working on a shot to become a painterly experience.

COLLINGS:

Oh, in what sense?

CURRY:

Well, when you're doing visual effects shots on film, you use a device called an optical printer to put elements together. An optical printer is basically a projector and a camera pointed at each other. You have film in the projector, then you can have mattes or little black-and-white areas of a frame that prevent part of the film from being exposed. When you use the inverse of the matte, you can burn something into the other part of the film. It's very technical. It requires endless trips to the lab. It's also very creative, but it's not painterly, where you can't, "Oh, let's do this." Like when I'm working on a painting, "Oh, I see that. Well, maybe I need a little more blue over here. Oh, let's change that shape a little bit." You can do that when compositing in video, especially--I've had the privilege of working with some wonderful compositors and digital artists, and so my job became, in a way, like an orchestra conductor, where I wasn't playing the instruments, but I was conducting the orchestra to get a final product that was all harmonious.

COLLINGS:

Wow, that's wonderful.

CURRY:

Luckily, I had great people to work with, so I could sit in the edit bay and basically conduct how the images were being created. Sometimes I would do it by hand myself. We had digital paint boxes that I could use myself, but there were things I--

COLLINGS:

Digital paint boxes, of course.

CURRY:

Yeah. But there were things I couldn't do because I didn't know how. Although I had a grasp of that technology, the interface between some of these technologies, like on a Flame, these node-based interfaces were something that the learning curve was way beyond what I would be able to accomplish in my lifetime with all my other responsibilities. But I could work with them and tweak things and adjust. "Hey, let's move that asteroid over a little bit. Ah, let's make the ship bank over here." It was very liberating, because being a painter at heart, the painterly aspect of working that way was like having a technical chain taken off my back and gave me the opportunity to shape and form almost like doing a painting. If you look at any of the episodes on Star Trek that I worked on--and we had other wonderful supervisors. I'm not hardly the lone hero of Star Trek effects, so please--

COLLINGS:

And you had mentioned last time that it was a big team effort.

CURRY:

Yeah, there were so many people. I appreciated that I had that painterly freedom to shape things as I

was going along, and it didn't require days and days of trips to the laboratory to see how things are coming along. You could see it happening in progress and work it till it's done.

COLLINGS:

That's very satisfying.

CURRY:

It was very satisfying.

COLLINGS:

You said that you had wanted to talk about the cultural significance of Star Trek, and you have kind of touched on that, but when you talk about that, it really makes me see the work on Star Trek was being a continuation of the work in the Peace Corps.

CURRY:

In a way, it was, but I think that's true. When I talk to young people at colleges and universities, basically, I would reinforce the idea that your life is your reference. There was what one of the greatest of traditional matte painters, a wonderful man named Albert Whitlock, would drive into his assistants and other people with whom he was willing to share his skills, "reference, reference, reference." Then I take that a step further. Beyond visual reference is your life as your reference, and that everything that you learn becomes part of what you do now. I look back, now that I'm moving into "geezer mode" and I know what I thought I knew when I was twenty, and what I thought I knew when I was thirty-five, and what I know now, that the wise person looks at life as a giant learning curve and that you're constantly adding to your library, and that the people who give up and cerebrally vegetate just wind up being couch potatoes and just absorbers of stuff. They no longer contribute, and I can't imagine a life where I'm not making things.

COLLINGS:

Right, yes, a maker of worlds.

CURRY:

So I think using your life as a reference, everything one would experience, and even little stories inspired by things, or an interesting encounter with somebody really unique becomes part of something that I draw upon for something else.

COLLINGS:

Can you think of an example of that?

CURRY:

Yeah. Well, I think I might have talked about the boatman in Bangkok.

COLLINGS:

Yes, yes.

CURRY:

Him. I remember meeting a man in Nepal who had been a Ghurka in the British Army. I met him in some village. He was able to quote Shakespeare and he was very interested in British theatre. How unlikely is it to see a guy who now had a braided moustache and is riding a pony out in the Himalayas sitting down and discussing the deeper meaning of Lady Macbeth. We discussed the likelihood that Shakespeare must have killed somebody in that time period. There were duels and all sorts of

violence, and I don't believe Shakespeare would have been able to imagine the inner turmoil of Lady Macbeth without the guilt of blood on his own hands.

COLLINGS:

Oh, very interesting. Sure, yes. Yeah, that's an interesting thought.

0:38:52.2

CURRY:

Another thing, going back to the team on Star Trek, I want to talk about a couple of people, and one of them is Ronald B. Moore. There were two Ron Moores on Star Trek, one was the writer/producer and one the visual effects guy. Ron started out as my coordinator and became a supervisor in his own right as the shows got bigger and we needed more supervisors. Ron and I had known each other from before on other projects, and had complementary skills. Ron was super organized. He would be able to keep track of budgets, hours, time, and because Ron was so good at that, it left me free to do the things I was good at. I was terrible at doing that paperwork, so I was able to just explore all the creative issues that mattered to me. My working relationship with Ron was pretty much how a production company works, because so many different skills are required to bring a movie into existence, or a TV show, which are short movies. You have makeup, you have the obvious ones, the director of photography, but then you have the camera crew, and the grips, without which any film can be made, and they do all the physical setting up of things, rigging. You have the gaffers, the lighting people. It's almost a military operation, in that they all have to be coordinated by the producers and led by the vision of the director.

It was amazing to be a part of that because you could see what cog in the wheel you were. It's like building a watch. There are all these incredible gears that interact with each other, and that's how a TV show or movie is, and even down to the drivers, the craft service people who are putting out food. They're all important, and without every person doing their job well, the totality of the show suffers. I remember admiring how incredibly great the grips were at tying knots and rigging things with ropes and how quickly they could set up dolly tracks. It's just not just the actors, the director and the camera crew, but it's everybody, going back to it's a termite mound--

COLLINGS:

That's what I was thinking, yes.

CURRY:

--that you have different people doing various tasks, and that totality, like the totality of life on Earth, becomes a single entity. That's the entity of a series. And because a series, unlike a movie where you get together, make it, then it's done. A series goes on and on and on for years, if you're lucky, and that entity is very powerful and draws you in. You become an inseparable part of it, in a way.

COLLINGS:

Right, right. Well, it's interesting to hear you describe it almost as a kind of a civilization, and, of course, one of the hallmarks of a civilization is that the civilization has a vision that sort of makes itself visible in art or religious expression of some kind, and so the product becomes that emblem of the civilization.

CURRY:

Well, that's true. That's a really interesting way to look at it, because if you look at ancient civilizations that are no longer with us, they had a collective identity and a collective goal that they worked toward, and then history would then make them continue or disappear. When the show was cancelled, that's like now that cultural entity disappears, but, luckily, it's been recorded, thanks to technology, and so we can revisit any time.

COLLINGS:

And then you have the interesting sort of doubling, in the case of Star Trek, where this emblem, this visual product, is actually expressing the same ideas, the civilization working together on the ground to produce itself.

CURRY:

Yeah, and especially having done two of the title sequences for the shows, I was always very proud of

the fact that at the beginning of Deep Space Nine or the beginning of Voyager, there's the title sequence, and that's--

COLLINGS:

Right, right, so it's an articulation of the entire vision.

CURRY:

Yeah, and I could say, "I did that with the help of many talented people"

COLLINGS:

"I did that."

CURRY:

With a group of wonderful people.

COLLINGS:

Right. Well, I know that you're invited to speak frequently, and what is it that you think is important to impart when you go on those speaking engagements?

CURRY:

Well, what's interesting, the kind of speaking I do is usually at educational institutes or museums, places like that. One of the things I don't do very often is speak at Star Trek conventions.

COLLINGS:

Oh, that's interesting. Why is that?

CURRY:

The people that run them think audiences are only interested in actors.

COLLINGS:

I see. Okay. Well, in the case of Star Trek, I find that puzzling.

CURRY:

So do many of us who worked behind the camera. It's a choice, but yet in Europe, there seems to be a greater interest in the technology of filmmaking. Like, I just did an interview with Brazil yesterday--

COLLINGS:

Oh, really?

CURRY:

--and they were very interested. So normally I talk about how I got into it, what the priorities were, how we did things, the evolution of technology, and basically they're interested in what it was like to be part of it, and so I talk about that. But if it's at a university or a college, I talk about curriculum and what filmmakers really should study. And I find it sad that in some institutions, they don't understand the interrelationship between fine arts, music, theatre, and film. I remember at one school I was explaining to a twenty-something who thought he knew the secrets of the universe said. I said, "Well, one of the things that you should do if you want to be a filmmaker is get involved with at least one live theatre production, and that way, you'll see how characters evolve, how the blocking evolves over the course of six weeks or whatever the length of time, because you don't have that luxury in film, or rarely do, and that you can get a good sense of what each craft involved is doing, and theatre is a good way to do it, and the main difference is you don't have cameras recording it." One kid said, "Oh, theatre's utterly irrelevant to film." I very patiently explained why that perception was inaccurate, and I hope that he came to understand the value of it. I said, "Why did so many plays become movies?"

COLLINGS:

Why are there rehearsals for films?

CURRY:

And the need to study art history. I find, especially in the visual effects area, a lot of young people think learning the software is king, and it's very, very important, but developing the basis for making wise artistic decision is king. (recorder turned off)

COLLINGS:

Okay, so we're back on. I wanted to ask you how you selected the projects that you worked on since you were with Star Trek, and I was thinking particularly of The Chronicles of Elijah Sincere and The Gifted, but you may have others that you wish to--

CURRY:

Yeah. Well, The Chronicles of Elijah Sincere was actually a short film, and it was written by--oh, god, Valentine Whittaker. The son of a classmate at Middlebury, Ed Goldberg, is Andrew Goldberg,

who's a big cheese at Chase, and he was trying to help this young woman, in a purely plutonic way, develop a career as an actress. His partner in the project, Valentine Whittaker, wrote the screenplay, a short film, to promote her. It was kind of a rape revenge movie. It was nonlinear and there were big gaps in the story that it--I guess I'm a little bit more of a traditionalist in the sense that I like things with a beginning, a middle, and an end. So I flew out to New York and directed it in Brooklyn. We had a cast, and there was a very good actor who was playing the bad guy. I wanted New York to be a character in the story, but, of course, we had no money, and so I did a lot of digital multi-plane paintings. I can show it to you if you're curious.

COLLINGS:

Oh, how interesting.

CURRY:

So we start off in New York and then we go to the seamier side and we wind up in Brooklyn, all in digital paintings.

COLLINGS:

Oh, how interesting.

CURRY:

And then we wind up seeing our protagonist. It's a kind of flashback and she's seriously deranged, and then we find out what happens. Then I wanted a scene where she spends time in a mental hospital, and, of course, we had no money and couldn't go to a mental hospital to shoot, so I decided to shoot those scenes in the basement of my friend's apartment and just hung a green screen up and then shot our protagonist against a green screen and then composited her into these very strange digital paintings of interiors of hospitals. Then there's some very graphic violence. There's a scene where she finally gets her revenge and she lures this guy who thinks he's going to have a romantic tryst. It winds up he's going to his own demise, and so I figured out a way to have her realistically cut his hand off and--

COLLINGS:

Oh, goodness.

CURRY:

It won some awards. I asked a friend of mine, Eugene Edwards, to do the score, and he was the assistant to the composer on Chuck. He wanted to experiment and learn about composing for film and how it would be to work with a director, so we would go through the whole spotting sequence about what the music needs to be here, what it needs to be there, because music really defines how the audience emotionally interprets the images they're seeing.

COLLINGS:

Yes, isn't that interesting?

0:50:33.2

CURRY:

So that was a really nice experience. But post-Star Trek, it took me a while to get another job, because I'd been with Star Trek so long and I'd been doing TV so long that features considered me a TV hack and not worthy of doing a feature, despite having done 118 features prior to Star Trek. But things came along and I did various projects.

One of my favorite shows was Chuck, a spy comedy for NBC with Zachary Levi, Yvonne Strahovski, and a great cast, a wonderful director of photography, Buzz Feitshans IV, and a really great crew, so it was fun to work on. What was great about it was it was a spy comedy that took place all around the world. Chuck, the protagonist, was sent an email by his old roommate, who had become a spy, unbeknownst to him, and flooded his brain with all this secret knowledge that occasionally something would trigger it and now he'd be a master of martial arts or he'd be able to speak another language or be able to do cool things. Then he had a minder, a beautiful young woman played by Yvonne Strahovski, and they would get into all these different adventures. I didn't do the first season because prior to that, I was doing Moonlight, the vampire detective story, which was kind of fun to work on. But Chuck was great, especially the working relationship with Buzz Feitshans, and in the stories we went all over the world. I said, "Okay, we don't have a lot of money, so if we want to be able to do all

this and keep within a realistic budget, here are the rules: we minimalize the number of sweeping crane moves that have matte shots in them and just do nodal pan tilts, the audience doesn't care. If you give me the authority to keep the directors under control so that not every shot is an ego shot and not shot's for a tentpole 150-million-dollar movie." The producers agreed with that, and so in the first season, I saved them almost a million dollars.

COLLINGS:

Wow.

CURRY:

In a normal pan tilt would, as the camera's moving, there's a constant change in perspective, but if you set the camera to pivot on the nodal point of the lens, then there's no perspective aberration, so I could get away with doing one 2-D matte shot as opposed to elaborate 3-D images that would serve the story just as well. So in the stories, we would go to Eastern Europe, Switzerland, and one of the best compliments I had was when our costume designer was on line at the supermarket one day and she was chatting with the lady next to her and was asked, "What do you do?" "Well, I'm the costume designer on Chuck." And the other lady said, "Well, you're so lucky you get to go all around the world." So at least that person believed it.

COLLINGS:

Yes.

CURRY:

And it was great fun. Zachary Levi, the star--the star's attitude is really critical to making a show fun or not, and Zach's his philosophy was, "I won the lottery by getting to be the star of a TV show and I want to make sure that when everybody goes home at night, they were happy they worked with me."

COLLINGS:

Oh, how great.

CURRY:

Great. You can't ask for more than that.

COLLINGS:

No, you can't.

CURRY:

Then Scott Bakula was on the show and he played Chuck's father, so I got to work with Scott again, who's a truly wonderful person. Linda Hamilton was on it as Chuck's mother, and Linda's great to work with. So we would go all over the city, but a lot of it we would shoot on backlots, and I could show you some examples of that from Chuck. It was just such a happy experience because of the quality of the people I worked with, and the show was fun. I hadn't done much comedy before--

COLLINGS:

Right, that's right.

CURRY:

--and they trusted me to do stuff in ways that were unexpected. Like, there was one episode where Chuck and a character, Volkoff, played by Timothy Dalton, were supposed to jump out of an airplane. We had no money. By coincidence, I happened to have a really nice model airplane, and so I just held

that up on a stick and took a photograph of it and then just put that in the sky, in the shot, and made it travel along its own lines of perspective, and since it was high up and your attention is on the two actors in the foreground in their skydiving outfits, you just buy that's a real plane.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, it just seemed that they had jumped from the plane.

CURRY:

Part of the trick of getting away with stuff like that is knowing what the audience is looking at, and they only have a few seconds to analyze a shot, unless they record it and pause it, so making sure that when you design or compose a shot, that you are guiding the audience what to look at so they don't pay attention to what not to pay too much attention to, but that's what gives context to the event that's happening. It's like in Star Trek, creating a universe for the stories to unfold in, the same is true of Chuck. We were creating worlds that Chuck would visit to have adventures in. The other cool thing on Chuck is once in a while, they would have Thai characters or they even did some episodes that were set in Thailand, and so I would be able to use old photographs I took overseas--

COLLINGS:

Oh, neat.

CURRY:

--and then write the Thai dialogue and coach the actors how to passably speak Thai phonetically for those moments.

COLLINGS:

Yes, yes, yeah, oh, that sounds like a lot of fun.

CURRY:

Yeah, and with just great people. I also got to work on Crisis. Cult was also really fun. We did that in Vancouver, and Cult had another great director of photography, Attila Szalay. It was about a cult that had an underground power within this world. Then The Witches of East End was kind of fun, about a coven of witches that were a big family of sisters and a mother, and they would have problems that would go back a long time. One of the characters was kind of a shadow monster who could appear once in a while. What we did there is I had the wardrobe department make a Day-Glo orange suit. We'd lock the camera down and shoot the scene normally and then we would have an actor in the Day-Glo orange suit run out, and because he was in the woods all the time, orange stood out. Then we were able to do a Chroma key from that and then built-in smoke and elements like that, so when you see it in the show, it looks like a smoke creature running around, but it was a guy in an orange suit.

COLLINGS:

Yeah. I mean, it sounds like you're back in your basement with your brother, you know, when you describe all of this.

CURRY:

Yeah. And I got to do some really cool matte paintings, and they were really nice people to work with, the crew up there, a good cinematographer, and I had a good on-set guy. Then I worked on Crisis in Chicago, which was interesting. It was about a school bus full of children who were the offspring of the most powerful and politically connected people in the country being held hostage in a remote mansion. That was fun to deal with. What was interesting is the whole season story took place in September in Washington, D.C., but we wound up shooting in January, and it came as a shock to some people in positions of power that it was really cold and snowing. So there was a lot of--

COLLINGS:

Do they still do (unclear)?

CURRY:

One of the directors who I'll not mention by name was, "Well, can't you remove the clouds of breath coming out of their mouth?" "No, we can't. There's nothing to replace it with." "All right, everybody. Hold your breath."

COLLINGS:

"Hold your breath."

CURRY:

The star was Gillian Anderson. She said, "Well, I have dialogue." So the director said, "Well, just mouth it and we'll loop in the sound later." And that went over not very well with such a dedicated actress as Gillian Anderson.

COLLINGS:

With a consummate actress, yes.

CURRY:

So there was a lot of interesting drama on that episode. The Chicago crew and the L.A. people having not the warmest relationship or the warmest reception, so it was culturally challenging. But most of the time, the shows were really fun to work on. The Gifted was fun. We had a really nice show runner and we shot in Atlanta, and it was about mutants who had special powers, so it was figuring out beams coming out of people's eyes or people being able to move water around in globs in the air, so that kind of stuff's fun.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, it sounds like fun.

CURRY:

It beats having the necessity to steal a shopping cart and move under a bridge.

COLLINGS:

Right. So are you approached for, I presume, these kinds of productions where your special skills--

CURRY:

Yeah, it's shows like that, yeah, and I have--

COLLINGS:

You have a special set of skills.

CURRY:

Well, I guess you kind of get trapped into the cubbyhole, and so people associate me with sci-fi stuff. Moonlight, the vampire detective show, was fun, because the hero's teeth would grow into fangs and people could fly and it was lots of matte shots and kind of derring-do and dangerous situations and stuff, and we got to shoot in the scummiest areas of L.A. in the middle of the night.

COLLINGS:

You've received many awards. Let's see. Seven Primetime Emmys, and 2019, you were made a Visual Effects Society fellow.

CURRY:

Yeah, that was a big deal for me. It's not widely known outside the industry or even much outside the Visual Effects Society, but every year, the society nominates a few people and only very few people get it, and you get the privilege of having, in screen credit, "VES" after your name. I considered it a great honor to have my name associated with so many other really great visual effects artists like Douglas Trumbull, Dennis Muren, people that are true legends and true pioneers who have made the industry much better than it would have been without their presence in it. So for me, being voted upon by my peers to receive that award was a very moving thing.

COLLINGS:

I would think, I would think. And you actually designed the Visual Effects Society award.

CURRY:

For the design of the VES award, there were numerous submissions. Eventually, I encouraged everybody, "Let's go back to the founding father of visual effects, Georges MÃ©liÃ¨s." There's a famous iconic shot of the rocket projectile in the eye of the anthropomorphic moon, and so we used that. Then we had the idea that on the back, to make it look like a set so that you could see that it's constructed out of wood, and there's a sleeping grip on the back of the award. I had the idea to put a little dome underneath and have it battery-powered so that on the award evening when you get your award, you can flip a switch on the bottom and the awards are self-illuminated, so in the dark in the big award room, as more and more people win awards for different categories, it's really cool to see them all lit.

COLLINGS:

How terrific, yes.

CURRY:

So, yeah, I thought that was cool and I was really proud to have been involved with that project. Then I got an Omni Award, the Cult TV Award from Great Britain, the inaugural Hollywood Digital Award that went for Star Trek, three International Monitor Awards. I think Star Trek got Saturn Awards. Again, we'd have a small team of people and I got the opportunity to be the recipient of the award and make the speech, but I always stressed that the award was collectively for the team and I just happened to be the person in the position to do that. One night when we won an Emmy, I was talking to Ron Moore, who was standing next to me while somebody was talking, and I touched the wings on the Emmy. They're really sharp, and I said, "Hey, this thing would come in handy in a dark alley," and that went out over the microphone.

COLLINGS:

Oh, no.

CURRY:

Then there was an interesting occurence--when you get the award, you go backstage to a publicity room where you get your picture taken in front of a drape with different logos on it. I remember going back there, and Cyndi Lauper, who I had never seen in person or spoken to before or since was there, just ahead of me in line. Tthere was a photographer who--and she had just won the award either for music or a performance; I forget. This pushy photographer, while I was chatting with her briefly and congratulating her, the photographer came up and just literally pushed me aside, said, "Cyndi, Cyndi, let me--." She grabbed me, pulled me back, and said, "No. Take a picture with him." She didn't know me, but it was just her graciousness to do that, and I've always--and I see her now on ads on TV for some health product or something, and whenever I see her, I always think of that moment because she was just basically really nice. She said, "You have to respect the people behind the camera that do that work because none of us would look good without them." I thought her dressing-down the photographer was a really nice, nice moment.

COLLINGS:

Nice expression of that. So you have written a book.

CURRY:

Am writing.

COLLINGS:

You are writing it.

CURRY:

My co-writer, Ben Robinson, and I are working on it. We're on the third layout and I'm going back through, rewriting the captions, making comments on the captions. I'm revising some illustrations and doing some new illustrations. A couple of chapters are not so interesting, like a chapter on using cotton for clouds and I said, "Eh, that's not that interesting." So, coming up with other ideas.

COLLINGS:

So it's called The Artistry of Dan Curry.

CURRY:

Right. That came from the publishers, not me.

COLLINGS:

Oh, I see. Okay, I was going to ask you about that.

CURRY:

I'm not that--

COLLINGS:

Because the cover is featuring your actual artwork.

CURRY:

Yeah, and we intentionally did that so that it's not photographs from the show or the models. The cover is actually physical paintings I did. So the bottom image is a large Enterprise from the original series I did as part of a comic book cover, and then some of the images are from the Star Trek guitar I did with Fender. Then there's a nebula that was in the final shot of Next Generation, then The Visible Klingon, which is an oil painting. And I actually designed the Star Trek logo for the cover too.

COLLINGS:

So what is the overall reason for the book?

CURRY:

Well, it came about in an interesting way. Ben Robinson, who has a company that also does beautifully detailed small-scale miniatures, and I had corresponded. I would help him out with a couple things, and he invited me to appear on a panel at Comic-Con. On the panel were Rick Sternbach, one of the conceptual designers of Star Trek, an illustrator, and a couple of other people. The panel was about using miniatures for visual effects, and the conceptual designers talked about designing them and I talked about using them. I brought some video clips. By coincidence, the head of CBS publishing, Risa Kessler, was in the audience. I talked about some of the more weird ways I would approach problems rather than traditional ways. After the presentation, Risa came up and said, "Well, you have a weird sense of humor and I like some of your out-of-the-box solutions. How about writing a book?" So it took about two years to get that organized.

COLLINGS:

Oh, that's great.

CURRY:

Then the publisher, Titan Books in London, wanted a co-writer, which worked for me, and Ben turned out to be a great collaborator and a good friend. The process would be Ben would call me up and we'd talk--it would be like interview, and then Ben would write it up and then send it to me and I'd rewrite it so I'd sound less like a blitherer that it's obvious I am now. We talked about what areas are we going to discuss. It traces the evolution of visual effects technology from doing things on film and how we gradually incorporated more CG and how as CG got better, we used more and more of it, culminating in Star Trek: Enterprise with Scott Bakula, where it was a totally CG show. Then there are anecdotes from different people who worked on the show. Kate Mulgrew, Scott Bakula, compositors I worked with all have little anecdotes about working with me and how unpleasant an experience it was for them. So that's basically what the book is. It's about--

COLLINGS:

Well, it's going to be a tremendous resource.

CURRY:

--204 pages, and it comes out September 2020.

COLLINGS:

Oh, very exciting. It's going to be a tremendous resource.

CURRY:

Well, we'll see. One of the reasons I wanted to do it, and given the hours Ben and I've worked on it, we'll probably make .03 cents per hour, but money is not what the book is about. I wanted to preserve some of the ways things were done before the computer took over everything.

COLLINGS:

Right, right. I'm so glad you did that.

CURRY:

Interesting enough, when I supervised season two of making Next Generation high-def, a lot of the younger guys whose total background was in computer animation, they were amazed at how we did things. They'd look at the elements, say, "You made that from this?" So I think that's one of the real purposes of the book, is to preserve some of that out-of-the-box thinking and odd ways to achieve what you're trying to accomplish.

COLLINGS:

Very good. I'm really looking forward to it.

CURRY:

I can show you the layout while you're here if you'd like to look at it and you can kind of scan through it.

COLLINGS:

That'd be nice. So what are you doing now in terms of your own artwork?

CURRY:

Well, I'm working on the book, of course, and I'm trying to draw every day, and I've been doing a lot of stream-of-consciousness drawing--

COLLINGS:

Ah, how interesting.

CURRY:

--where I'll just start by making a couple of strokes on a piece of paper or whatever I'm working on and let it evolve into whatever pulls me into the drawing so it becomes an adventure of exploration.

COLLINGS:

And what kinds of drawings are coming forth?

CURRY:

Well, sometimes they're abstract. A lot of them are just studies of the human face. I've always been interested in the structure of the human face. I remember even in elementary school, one day I had an epiphany walking down the hall. There was a drawing done by an older student and I realized, oh, that's how the jawline works, and I realized, oh, all ears have the same kind of pattern inside. So, I enjoy exploring the human face, but twisting it and rearranging it and doing it in different ways has been of interest, and a lot of it's abstract. One of the things I really want to do--and I've been saving material for years--is I want to get into sculpture from found objects, kind of an offshoot of making spaceships for Star Trek out of found objects.

COLLINGS:

Because I've seen your sort of assemblage sculptures, which are those spaceships and things.

CURRY:

But I want to do human figures, by cutting up Clorox bottles and using different things that are found. Basically, I realized that everything we make is anthropomorphic in one way or another. Caps on bottles are incredibly high-tech and precision-made so that you can grip them, and so if you use such things, you can assemble them in a way that they were never intended to be, but yet they can be very beautiful. Another one of the things I'm working on is promoting the guitar that Brandon MacDougall and I came up with.

COLLINGS:

This was the Fender Stratocaster?

CURRY:

No, that's a separate project. It's the Curry/MacDougall guitar. It's our guitar. We call it the Mobius Flux at the moment, and it's a different way of approaching the ergonomics for a guitar player, and it really works every--every good player I've had try it out all love it. What we would love to do with that is have a manufacturer license to design and start making them.

COLLINGS:

That would be great.

CURRY:

So we'll see. But I believe in the design. So I've been turning down work.

COLLINGS:

Some industry TV stuff?

CURRY:

Just anything. For example, there was one I was offered that required a year-and-a-half commitment, and at my age, that's not necessarily the wisest thing to do, and I want to be able to travel some, so I am backing off work.

COLLINGS:

And you want to do your own artwork, it sounds like.

CURRY:

Yes, I want to do my own artwork, so as soon as I finally finish the book, I'm going to get very serious. And I want to do some personal writing. I want to write about my experiences in Laos during the war. I want to write fictionalized accounts, and about a side trip of somebody going back for vengeance on somebody who did something really bad during the war and the protagonist thought that that person was dead, but finds out he's still alive and they take a family vacation. Unbeknownst to his family, he and a couple of his buddies make a little side trip to take care of business.

COLLINGS:

Wow. That sounds serious.

CURRY:

So those are some of the projects that I'd like to do, and I don't have to work if I'm frugal, and so I think at this stage of life, I've procrastinated too long about other things. If a project comes along that really excites me or if it's a project of my own that--I've been writing a lot of projects for TV and features, and if one of those is chosen, then, of course, I would do that, but--

COLLINGS:

But it has to be something that your heart is really in.

CURRY:

Something my heart's in. I think I'm just--one time my son observed when he was in high school, said, "You've used your intelligence and creativity to make thankless and perceptually challenged people look brilliant." That's not always true, but in some cases, it was quite true. On the other hand, I've had the privilege to work with some really great filmmakers and influential people, and it was just a privilege to do even a tiny part of their films. You know, like I was blessed to be able to work on Raiders of the Lost Ark and Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom and Top Gun, got to work with Carl Reiner and Steve Martin, and on some films with John Landis. Those people are wonderful, and

so just doing a little bit of their movies was a great privilege. But there are some people that "privilege" would not be the first term to come to mind in a professional work relationship with them.

COLLINGS:

Well, it sounds like you're well situated to move on to do this artwork that you've described. It sounds very exciting.

CURRY:

Yeah, and on a personal level, I am going to have to become a cyborg fairly soon and have my hip replaced.

COLLINGS:

Oh, okay.

CURRY:

So I'll be assimilated into the Borg continuum. My wife hasn't been home to Thailand in too long, so we want to go to Thailand early next year. Hopefully, I'll be recuperated by then and spend some time over there. So I've got things I really need to do, and I think I've earned the privilege of focusing on my own work now.

COLLINGS:

Absolutely, yeah. Well, shall we leave it there, then?

CURRY:

That sounds good.

COLLINGS:

Okay. (End of August 6, 2019 interview)

SESSION FIVE (8/6/2020)

00:00:00

COLLINGS:

Okay, so we are recording, and today is August 6, Jane Collings interviewing Dan Curry by phone. And Dan, how and when did you first hear about the virus?

CURRY:

It must have been around Christmas time. And we started to hear inklings of it, around the Wuhan market in China, the wet market. Certain areas of China are legendary for eating species that are not normally consumed by humans. My wife and I thought it was similar, but not quite as devastating as Ebola. A disease that leapt from animals into humans because of exotic human food consumption and humans invading habitats that are not normally places where we coexist with certain species that carry such diseases.

COLLINGS:

You've lived in Thailand and you've certainly seen a lot of different kinds of cuisine. So maybe you were sort of used to that idea?

CURRY:

Well, yeah, but the more unusual cuisine in Thailand did not include bats. I probably saw more odd things in Laos. In remote areas, food was sometimes very difficult to obtain, so people were more flexible in what they were willing to eat. Probably the strangest thing I ate a lot of was barbecued field rat. It's actually pretty good. When it's spicy, you don't really know what you're eating. It's just some unidentifiable muscle tissue--

COLLINGS:

Just a muscle, yeah.

CURRY:

They were certainly clean. Part of our Peace Corps training was getting volunteers used to seeing animals slaughtered. As you know, most Americans think meat comes in Styrofoam trays in the market.

COLLINGS:

Oh, that's interesting, that that was part of the training.

CURRY:

Yeah. Oh yeah. To prepare us to see animals being slaughtered in remote villages because that's how food there gets to one's plate. I think they didn't want Peace Corps volunteers passing out or, you know, throwing up in horror. One of the few things that would make me throw up now is seeing Sean Hannity or Tucker Carlson in a restaurant.

COLLINGS:

That wasn't part of the training, I guess.

CURRY:

No.

COLLINGS:

So when you heard about Wuhan and the virus, were you concerned about--

CURRY:

Not really. We--my family and I--talked about it, especially because my wife is from Thailand. We certainly were aware of it, and aware of the propensity of certain areas of China to consume unusual species, but we thought the virus yet would be contained within that region and not necessarily become a global pandemic.

COLLINGS:

Did you have a particular reason for thinking that it would be successfully contained?

CURRY:

Just because our president said that the Chinese were doing a terrific job at the time. He didn't yet

have a need to blame people for his failures, and it just seemed like something that would be eminently containable because the outbreak occurred in such a small-scale place. And then when the outbreak expanded and the Chinese closed down the entire area, we assumed that it was likely to be contained there as they stopped travel in and out. And of course, viruses ignore borders as well as political parties, and it just became uncontrollable, especially with aid of modern travel with air transportation, and so forth. Covid19 just became a tragedy of errors, misconceptions, and poor judgment.

COLLINGS:

Yeah. So what was happening in your household stateside as news started coming forward that the virus had come to Washington, was spreading? What was the train of events there?

CURRY:

Well, we were partially in blissful ignorance and partially concerned. Once the virus broke out in Washington, my wife and I both speculated that it would eventually spread throughout the country. Once something like that gains a foothold and especially taking into account the extent of travel, cheap airfare, and cheap international travel, we had a feeling the sickness was going to explode.

COLLINGS:

Yeah. So what precautions did you feel that you needed to start taking if any?

CURRY:

Well, canceling air travel plans, for sure, and starting to stick closer to home, slowing down on our restaurant visits, and making sure that the restaurants we did go to where ones we were familiar with and we're comfortable with their sanitation procedures.

COLLINGS:

Now, your son was in New York still at this time, or is he--

CURRY:

He and his girlfriend had come out for Christmas and spent the holidays with us, but they had gone back to New York by the time the virus started to spread out from Washington.

COLLINGS:

And were you hearing reports from him, you know, back in New York, as things started to go sideways over there?

CURRY:

Yeah, sure, especially because New York is one of the great travel hubs, one of the most business and tourist significant destinations in the country. Once Covid19 hit the city--and they both teach at NYU--the university started to take precautions and began to move into remote teaching, they wisely decided they were going to stick to home. We encouraged that. And then my son and his girlfriend went up to her family's house in Connecticut for a couple of weeks after the school decided to shut down and do everything by remote, and they could teach their classes from anywhere. Her parents' house, in Connecticut, is in the small suburb of West Hartford. They figured it would be safe and only last a couple of weeks before it would be under control. And of course, that turned out to be an example of wishful thinking.

COLLINGS:

Right. So were they able to come back to New York, eventually?

CURRY:

After a couple of weeks, they went back to New York. They just wanted to live their lives normally in their apartment in Brooklyn. So that's where they have been ever since.

COLLINGS:

And on your end, one--you said that you, in fact, contracted COVID-- Was that before the safer at home or after? What's the story there?

CURRY:

Well, we had been practicing very extreme safety precautions. When we went out, we would basically limit our out-of-house travels to driving the car once in a while to make sure the fluids move through the engine, and walking around in the neighborhood. And we were always masked. We stopped going to stores and started having our food delivered. When food would show up, we'd wear masks and gloves and wipe everything down with Clorox sanitation wipes, and then leave things out in the sun. I would even take the precaution of waving an ultraviolet light over things. One mistake I possibly made is I did make a visit to the post office, as I had to mail something. A client had ordered glicee print of one of my paintings, and I wanted to get it off to him. And when I went to the post office, I actually wore a raincoat. I made a full face visor out of a clear acetate animation cell.

COLLINGS:

Wow.

CURRY:

I wore double masks and gloves. In the post office, everybody was very cautious, and several feet apart, but there is a perpetually grumpy employee in our local post office who I never particularly cared for. I always suspected he had chronic hemorrhoids because he was always in a bad mood. And he, of course, had the mask over his chin and mouth, but not his nose. I did point out that that was useless, and he just grumbled about it. Then as I was leaving, there was a young man who wore his mask over his chin, leaving his mouth and nose exposed. And that might've been a contact point for

contracting the virus. But there was no way to know. That was several weeks before I started feeling strange and my heart--where my heartbeat would get very fast and then very slow, and very fast, and up to 140 beats per minute, and then slowed down to about 40 beats a minute.

COLLINGS:

Jesus! How frightening!

CURRY:

I thought I was having some sort of heart issue, and my lungs started to feel like I was standing downwind from a campfire, and smoke from--

COLLINGS:

Oh, geez!

CURRY:

So I called up our cardiologist went over to see him. He gave me an EKG and he said, "Well, this is not good. You have to take care of this immediately."

COLLINGS:

Oh!

CURRY:

His office is directly across the street from one of LA's great hospitals, St. Joseph's in Burbank. And so I went over to the emergency room where they gave me another EKG. I noticed all the staff were masked and had visors onâ€¦ we're talking serious visors that looked like something that an astronaut would wear. They gave me a Coronavirus test, and a few hours later, the nurse came and said, "We're moving you into isolation. You just tested positive.

COLLINGS:

Oh, my!

CURRY:

So they moved me up to the floor designated for COVID patients and put me in a room that had the door sealed by a very heavy-duty plastic sheet with a zipper on it. And when people came in and out of the room, they wore hazmat suits. A representative of the hospital came in and started asking me questions like, "If this goes really bad, do you want to be intubated? Do you want this? How do you want to deal with it? Who is your emergency? What happens if you die?"

COLLINGS:

Oh, my!

CURRY:

So that was not encouraging.

COLLINGS:

No.

CURRY:

But it turned out that--there was a sign out front of the hospital I noticed when we pulled in. The sign said, "Heroes work here." And that sign was proven to be true. A valet, parked my car. My wife went home with a friend who came to pick her up. We were afraid of putting her in an Uber because you don't know who was in there before you. Our friend had to go into quarantine for two weeks.

COLLINGS:

Yes.

CURRY:

And my wife was quarantined at home, too. Luckily, my symptoms never got too severe.

COLLINGS:

Really?

CURRY:

They gave me medication to get my heart rate under control. Luckily, my oxygen level remained high, and my lungs slowly stopped having that burning feeling. After a number of days in the hospital, they said, "It's probably safer for you to be home than to stay here." So I arranged to be released. And I requested a piece of blank paper and drew a picture of the Enterprise, which I've probably drawn a thousand times doing storyboards, as part of a thank you note. I thought they might be interested that a visual effects supervisor from Star Trek was one of their patients, as many people are Star Trek fans.

COLLINGS:

Yeah!

CURRY:

I thought the hospital staff would find that a curious coincidence, and wrote up an elaborate thank you note to them, praising them. Another thing that became obvious is that the anti-immigration stance of many people in our country is misplaced as 60 to 70% of the people I encountered in the hospital were foreign-born. Two nurses from West Africa, nurses from the Philippines, from Eastern Europe, from Asia--

COLLINGS:

Yep.

CURRY:

Doctors, from the sub-continent. If there were no immigrants, we would have nobody working in our hospitals.

COLLINGS:

Very sobering.

CURRY:

When we got her home, I put up plastic tarps in the house and divided the house in half. So my wife moved into the guest quarters, where she had access to the kitchen and the outside. And then I walled off my end of the house, where I had access to the master bedroom and my office. And luckily I'm married to one of the best Thai chefs in Los Angeles.

COLLINGS:

(Laughs)

CURRY:

She would, with mask and gloves, prepare food for me and drop it on a small table. And then when she was well clear, and on the other side of the plastic sheets, then I would go out and pick up the food and take it back into my room. Interestingly enough--and I can send you some examples--I did a series of drawings while I was in bed that I call my COVID series. Unlike, my professional work that--as you know, is primarily photo-real, so doing these pieces--I abandoned realism. I always keep in mind a great quote from Pablo Picasso, one of the true geniuses of art. He said, "When I was a child, they taught me to paint like an adult. When I became an adult, I realized I had to paint like a child." I interpreted that as just painting with pure innocence and just making however you express yourself, visually, beautiful on your own terms and forget making it look real by someone else's standards. And so, I did a series--I would start with a few random strokes, and then as I began to see things in them, I would explore where they lead. Occasionally they would become very photo-real. Frequently, they would become abstract structural things. And, more often than not, they became distorted faces. Another thing I remember from childhood, reading about Leonardo DaVinci, is that he had a penchant for almost every day, drawing grotesque profiles of human faces.

COLLINGS:

Is that right?

CURRY:

Some of those are can be found in books or on line. I remembered another quote from the legendary

director John Ford when they were location-scouting in a flat area of the desert, and the director of photography said, "Well, there's nothing interesting to shoot here. The landscape's flat and barren." And John Ford said, "You're forgetting the most interesting landscape of all, the human face." So for years, I've been drawing these odd abstracted distorted faces. That's why I started drawing these faces of the COVID series. I guess, subconsciously, they expressed my feelings about the impact of this virus, not only on me personally, but on our species. Once we hang up, I'll send you a few of those. I think you might find them interesting.

COLLINGS:

Okay. And, so this is not artwork that you did while you were ill with COVID.

CURRY:

No. It's was all work that I did while I was ill, sick in bed.

COLLINGS:

It's about the experience. It's about the illness, as well.

CURRY:

Well, not necessarily about as much as a product of.

COLLINGS:

So how do you see it? How did you bring that notion of the impact of the virus on the species into the work?

CURRY:

It was just purely subliminal, subconscious expression. I didn't intentionally set out to do works of art about the virus.

COLLINGS:

Okay.

CURRY:

It was because I was sick with the virus, that's what came out.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, I would love to see those! So your symptoms were the erratic heartbeat, that--

CURRY:

And the lungs.

COLLINGS:

And the lungs, yeah. And that's what alerted you to--and you have no idea--besides going out to the post office, you had no other exposure?

CURRY:

No. A couple of times, I would go out to get something out of my car, and I'd look out the door, if there was nobody around, I'd just walk out without a mask and grab it and come back in. But as I later came to understand, somebody could have walked by an hour earlier, coughed, and left a cloud of microorganisms floating in the air. It could have been something on a package of delivered food. It could have been something on the mail. Occasionally, I'd have to sign for a delivery. And even though I had gloves and a mask on, it could have been something that I didn't wipe 100% effectively. I'll never know how I contracted it.

COLLINGS:

Wow. That's astonishing.

CURRY:

And it looks like I'm going to have permanent results from this.

COLLINGS:

Really?

CURRY:

Well, they put me on Eliquis, which is a fairly heavy-duty blood thinner, and that will serve two purposes, but the primary purpose is to prevent blood clots that can form as a result of the virus in various organs, like that Broadway star that had to have a leg amputated and ultimately passed away.

COLLINGS:

Yes.

CURRY:

At the pinnacle of health. So to prevent strokes, I will be taking Eliquis indefinitely. Then, I take another medicine called Metoprolol, if I pronounced that correctly, to keep my heartbeat regular. I can still feel like there's a hand inside my chest, gripping my heart.

COLLINGS:

Really?

CURRY:

My lungs still don't feel I'm completely clear. And I was diagnosed with COVID on July 2.

COLLINGS:

July 2. Wow, that's quite a story. And to think that you got it while taking all of these precautions. And I know that as somebody who has a very scientific mind, your precautions must have been absolutely to the T.

CURRY:

Well, they were. But there are two blessings from this. And one of the blessings is that my wife never contracted it. She's remained--

COLLINGS:

Thankfully!

CURRY:

Thank God for that.

COLLINGS:

Yes.

CURRY:

And the other thing is when I look at what happened to so many other people who suffered horrible consequences and death, I consider myself very lucky that by comparison my symptoms and consequences are relatively light.

COLLINGS:

Yes.

CURRY:

Especially considering my age. And I attribute that to eating fresh food, thank God, for my wife's cooking prowess. I also attribute it to exercise, especially having done Tai Chi for 50 years. I think

Tai Chi is one of the blessings for humanity that came from China. And looking at the virus historically, considering the black plague that decimated 30% of Europe, there were positive consequences from it. It led to more modern scientific attitudes towards sanitation, less magical thinking about disease and its causes, and the realization that disease affects all levels of society, and it's not just relegated to the poor or rich, although there are always economic factors that would lead one segment of society to become more prone to illness than another, factors that we're witnessing still today. So I think that there will be, ultimately, good long-range consequences as we begin to understand this virus and begin to understand the relationship between human intrusion into certain animal habitats.

COLLINGS:

Yes.

CURRY:

And human hubris about our ability to solve problems, and the need to work together collectively throughout the world, because, in a way, this virus is the equivalent of an alien invasion from another planet.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, that's a good way of putting it, very Star Trek-y.

CURRY:

Well, it is because if an alien species attacked Earth, everybody would band together to fight them off. And that's really what's happening. It's just that--it's a matter of scale instead of giant spaceships, it's microorganisms.

COLLINGS:

Yes!

CURRY:

They're attacking us worldwide, and if we don't learn to work together, share scientific advances, share medical advances, our species is in serious trouble. Just as there's something called the Overview Effect, which all astronauts and people who go into space experience when they realize there are no borders, they're all figments of human imagination, and that the virus doesn't respect borders or political parties. It doesn't necessarily obey wishful thinking and dogma. We need to grow up as a species on that level and realize that we are one species, on one planet, which is basically a giant finite spaceship drifting through the void of space, and we need to take care of our planet and take care of each other or we're doomed.

COLLINGS:

Well, I think that's very interesting too, to think of it in terms of this idea of the Overview Effect. That's a great correlation. Just as an aside, regarding the Overview Effect, are you aware of particular ways that astronauts or others who have experienced this have possibly changed their political views?

CURRY:

Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, I'm part of a group, we meet every Wednesday morning, run by Frank White, who was the person who conceived of the Overview Effect. And if you do a Google search on Frank White, you can find a lot of information about Frank; he is a wonderful man, and The Overview Institute and all its members. I am privileged to be on the board of directors.

COLLINGS:

I knew you were involved, but I didn't realize that it was an ongoing, did you say weekly or monthly meetings?

CURRY:

Weekly. Every Wednesday morning. And there it's a collection of astronauts, artists, scientists, writers, philosophers. It's something that we are expanding. It's international. There are people that attend from all over the world. And I think it's something that people should be enlightened by. There's a book by another friend of mine, Kevin Kelly, who lives on a small island off Vancouver. Kevin and I appeared at a space symposium ran by the European Space Agency on a trip to Spain a few years ago. Kevin wrote a book called "The Home Planet," which is very influential. It talks about aspects of the Overview Effect, and so I would encourage you to take a look at Frank White on the internet.

COLLINGS:

I will.

CURRY:

And take a look at information about it.

COLLINGS:

I will. And has--in these Wednesday meetings, has there been discussion of the virus?

CURRY:

Oh, yeah. As a matter of fact, that's what instituted these meetings, talking about how the virus is affecting the future of space exploration, and how it's affecting our planet. There are a lot of correlations are about it. And so we normally start off--and the group can be anywhere from 30 to well over 50 people tuning in at once. We have a general topic for each meeting, and then we break down into smaller groups of five or six people for a more focused discussion where everybody can

voice their opinion. And then we go back to the main group, and each group then reports on what they discussed. If you're interested, I'll send you information about next Wednesday's meeting, which would be at 9:00 a.m. You would certainly be welcome to join in.

COLLINGS:

Oh, I would love to, thank you. That would be much appreciated. So just sort of, as an overview, an overview of the Overview Effect, what--how has the virus impacted space travel as far as the consensus up to now?

CURRY:

Well, that would be a good topic to--I talked to Frank about, but I would say, it certainly--a lot of the great achievements of late--like the Dragon launch and recovery that we just saw, was so overshadowed and kind of ignored by many people because of the intense focus on the virus, and also the intense focus on the current political squabbles. But it certainly is affecting space exploration in the same way that--to bring it up, that it's something that we're all sharing, just like all humanity is sharing the discoveries of space. As Neil Armstrong said in 1969, you know, "One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind." All humanity shared that achievement, even though it was a small American crew of three people.

COLLINGS:

Right, right.

CURRY:

And so all humanity is benefiting, even though they may not be aware of it. Many people are opposed to spending money on space exploration. It is for the benefit of mankind because ultimately, we have to be a species that moves out from our planet.

COLLINGS:

You believe that?

CURRY:

Absolutely.

COLLINGS:

Okay. That sounds--that's a scary thought.

CURRY:

No, I absolutely believe that for a number of reasons. And I think from my perspective, it's just that we're hungry to learn. I think the more we move off our planet, the more we realize how precious Earth is. And there are resources, there are things to discover that can change us. And as we make discoveries, such as if we find evidence of life on Mars, it will radically change how terrestrial philosophy is perceived and even may change perceptions of religion, perceptions of who we are, how we came about. I think it's better to know than be ignorant despite what our present administration might feel, that just going out into space and learning more and more about our universe can only benefit us.

COLLINGS:

We really are still in the Stone Age, aren't we?

CURRY:

In many ways. And there are a lot of troglodytes who would like to take us further back.

COLLINGS:

Yes. Shall we switch gears just a little bit and let me ask you about the project that you're currently working on?

CURRY:

Well, I'm working on several projects.

COLLINGS:

Okay.

CURRY:

I'm working with friends who I've collaborated with on film and television to develop a virtual stage in Vancouver, which will be a 180-degree, 60-foot diameter cyclorama of led screens, much like the great Industrial Light and Magic developed to produce The Mandalorian. Ours will be focused on episodic television production, and to keep costs down--and it will allow filmmakers to work in virtual environments in a very realistic, unprecedented, cutting-edge ethical way so that you can be on stage in a very safe environment and yet travel all over the cosmos or all over the world. It will offer the ability to have a camera move in front of a virtual background, with live actors in the foreground, using a motion capture system to determine where things are. And then, you will see the perspective change in accordance with camera moves on the virtual environment displayed on the screen behind them. I'm also working with another group of producers on an action-adventure story that I wrote as a trilogy. They want to do it as a limited series for cable television, which is the future of entertainment.

COLLINGS:

Yeah.

CURRY:

It's about an American mining engineer in the 1800's who was raised by Apaches and has to leave the country because he defended his Apache stepsister from the depravations of racist people who wanted to shame her--

COLLINGS:

So the reverse of The Searchers.

CURRY:

Yeah, it's the reverse of The Searchers. Our protagonist winds up accepting a job through his boss who had a schoolmate at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute during its founding years and takes a job modernizing a tin-mining operation on an Island Kingdom in the Java Sea.

COLLINGS:

Wow, this is fascinating!

CURRY:

He goes out on the Northeastern, or the great Eastern rather, and one of the first ocean-going paddle-wheel ocean liners, and goes to Penang, where he meets the son of the Rajah, the heir to the throne of the island kingdom, and they're both alpha males. The son of the Rajah is a master of Silat, the Indonesian indigenous martial art. Our hero was raised by Apaches, so he's quite adept at their

fighting style. They wind up being lured onto a reef, their ship sinks, and they survive. They swim through shark infested waters and find themselves onshore where they hear strange harpsichord music off in the jungle. They follow it, and discover a spectacular ancient ruined palace inhabited by a group of aristocrats from around the world led by a retired officer of the Bengal Lancers. They're all passionate big-game hunters. They've given up on hunting animals, and lure passing ships to their jungle--

COLLINGS:

I see. Yeah.

CURRY:

So that they can nurse the survivors back. It's inspired by--

COLLINGS:

The Most Dangerous Game.

CURRY:

Yeah, the famous short story, and then they did the original movie with Joel McCrea and Fay Wray, done by the same people who did the original King Kong. The story has been reinterpreted multiple times. Richard Widmark and Trevor Howard in "Run for the Sun." Then, Jean-Claude Van Damme in "Hard Target." But I think this is kind of an original take on it, and instead of using hounds, our insane retired officer uses head hunters.

COLLINGS:

Oh, God.

CURRY:

Our two heroes who don't like each other are forced to become allies in order to survive and save a beautiful young lady,--the daughter of a Dutch planter, and her brother who also survived the shipwreck. It's the classic story, but just like Star Wars, that drew its inspiration from the Japanese film, The Hidden Fortress.

COLLINGS:

Right, right. Well, I've always been interested in, you know--and these are the kinds of films that you were interested in growing up, but I've always been interested in this--what I could sort of think of as the newsreel impulse that the idea of showing all kinds of unreachable and interesting locales and cultures in film. And, you know, there was a lot of that--you know--in the kind of adventure films that you saw when you were growing up. There was a period when that was important. And now it almost seems like this tool that you're developing with the LED screen is--combined with COVID, when people are not traveling, you know, it's almost like a perfect storm where you can introduce all of these locations, you know, they don't have to actually be shot in these locations.

CURRY:

Yep. And there's another project I'm doing too, working with two other producers based on an idea my son, a friend of ours, Alex Rueda, and I developed. We call it "Celestia." It's about the world's first five-star orbiting hotel, taking advantage of the soon-to-come space tourism, but it also incorporates the Overview Effect.--like on the Love Boat, where people would go onto the cruise ship and have shallow romantic trysts, but in our case, it will be much more serious, and people will go into orbit and encounter political intrigues, and be changed by their experience in space and resulting from the Overview Effect. One of the things we want to do with it is create roles for handicapped people who when working in a zero-gravity environment eliminates their physical invitations.

COLLINGS:

Interesting. Yeah.

CURRY:

In this giant orbiting hotel, there would be a central core where there is no gravity, and people that work in there might have suffered amputations, but in Celestia they could float around on little jet packs so their movement is unlimited in zero-G.

COLLINGS:

Yes.

CURRY:

They don't need to walk because of the environment they work in. How I would present them is introduce those characters where you don't see their whole body, and just let the audience get to know them as characters, and then ultimately reveal that they have a limitation, but by then the audience has just gotten to know them as people. So their limitations are not a novelty; it's just a fact of life of who they are.

COLLINGS:

Right, right. That's a great project too! So both of these are going on.

CURRY:

Yeah. I'm in negotiation on both of them right now.

COLLINGS:

Wow.

CURRY:

With the action-adventure project, I would be working with a great director who's also a noted director of photography, and a very-well established Hollywood writer who has a number of major features to his credit.

COLLINGS:

Now, did interest in these projects evolve in any way out of the pandemic?

CURRY:

Possibly. And I think because of the fact that people can't go to theaters--There's a greater hunger for content for television, especially since the arrival of Netflix, and Showtime, and Hulu. And that--and also the fact that they're looking--they can do bigger stories, and they're not worried about ratings because they don't have to sell commercials because their budgets are pre-funded by subscribers. And the fact that it's not broadcast TV, they're not worried about censorship for either a language, violence, or nudity. So my intent on those would be to have everything done with clinical accuracy.

COLLINGS:

And what's being suggested as far as how production would proceed?

CURRY:

Well, that's something--I'm also consulting with a couple of studios on post-COVID production

practices and how visual-effects techniques can be used to say the unsaid. For example, a friend of mine is doing a film in Germany, and their safety practices are such that it would be inconceivable a year ago to do that, where you use a makeup brush on an actor, and it must be thrown away immediately. Nothing is reused. And the time it takes to do things has expanded exponentially. One of factor is there will be a boon for husband and wife acting for romantic scenes because people don't want to get too close to people they don't know. There have even been attempts to have actors hugging green pillows, to be replaced by another actor. And then, of course, camera crews being inside plexiglass booths, only so many people out on set at a given time, and a lot of this is just not practical by the way films are made, but it's going to be an evolution to come up with safety practices that work and are not going to cripple production to the point of not being able to do it at all. Those practices are, I think, are going to be bridge practices until there is a real, effective vaccine that people trust and actually works, and that's not on the immediate horizon.

COLLINGS:

Right. Right. And how about the visual effects--I mean, you've suggested that this is kind of a boon for the visual effects area, because--

CURRY:

We'll say for example, if you do a high school show, and you want or need students in a crowded hallway. Well, obviously you're not going to shoot the crowd of extras in a hallway with principle actors, so what you would be doing is using virtual crowds, using gaming technology, using a crowd tiling where you have a few extras and you shoot them in one spot and move them to another, then another, to make it look like you have a large crowd, while shooting your foreground hero actors against a green screen so that the background people are not in the same place at the same time during production. Another technique is using long (telephoto) lenses to make things compressed on the Z-axis, like when you're watching a baseball game and you have a telephoto lens shooting from the outfield over the pitcher - the catcher looks closer than the pitcher sometimes. And so determining which lenses are used to compress space. Those are practices that are designed to keep actors and crews safe on set and reduce the number of people in the same place at the same time.

COLLINGS:

It sounds like technology kind of interfering, perhaps, with the creative juices or maybe it creates an opportunity to just kind of conceptualize and build narratives in a different way.

CURRY:

Well, something happened like that at the advent of sound. Towards the end of silent film era, the camera moves were really amazing. The cameras were flying all over the place--

COLLINGS:

Yes! Oh, yes!

CURRY:

There were great films like, with those with Douglas Fairbanks, or, I remember seeing a silent version of "The Last of the Mohicans" where they actually put cameras on like clotheslines and would launch them with catapults across a battlefield.

COLLINGS:

Oh, really?

CURRY:

And they were really amazing. But then when sound came along, the cameras were so loud, they had to put them inside soundproof booths. They hadn't come up with booms for microphones yet. So they would hide the microphones on set, and then people would stand around and make sure they could be heard by the hidden mic.

COLLINGS:

Yeah. Almost like a televised radio program or something.

CURRY:

Right. And so then camera moves, well, basically stopped, and it became like shooting plays. And until sound technology and quieter cameras came along and they invented blimps, which were like big bags that went around the cameras that control the sound, then cameras started to be fluid again. So one thing cramps another style, but then there's always a way to evolve back in it because there are so many brilliant engineers and filmmakers that have to tell stories according to their vision, which includes fluid camera work, then it's just going to come back one way or another.

COLLINGS:

Yeah. I mean, so film language is constantly evolving, especially with the superhero movies and whatnot, there's been a lot of digital work and who knows? They might even open up a space where having a more unmediated film--you know, the relationship between the camera, and the environment, and actors--might see a resurgence.

CURRY:

Well, also, there's a lot of work being done. I've seen prototypes of 3D screens without glasses. And I think it's not too far before Gene Roddenberry's vision of the holodeck from Star Trek becomes a reality.

COLLINGS:

Oh, wow. That would be really interesting. Yes. The language of film is just in its infancy. You said that you were doing some painting as well during this period?

CURRY:

Yes, I've always been a painter. I never stopped. And because of my work in film and television, I've been painting primarily in obscurity. And I was getting ready to do a show at the Art Director's Guild of my personal work. And then, of course, the virus put a stop to that. And so--but I've been framing work and doing a lot of due-work, and exploring new styles, with the hope of eventually being in a situation where people can actually attend the art galleries again.

COLLINGS:

Yes, that would be nice. And is that work different from what you had been doing before?

CURRY:

Yes. Yes. And I've been loosening up. I tend to be very tight and very realistic, and I still do some work like that, but I'm loosening up doing more abstract work, doing work that is just pure subliminal expression. And, like any artist, I can't tell if it has any value or if it's good or not, but it just feels honest. It seems like it's the right thing to be doing at this time.

COLLINGS:

Well, you know, people talk about how being cut off, in essence, from society, even though we're connected digitally and whatnot-- And with the shutdown-- That there's this notion that something that might've taken four hours to do now takes four days to do; that your mind wanders, that you think about things in a different way. And I don't know if you would agree with that, but it makes me want to ask you that, because it sounds like you're doing painting that is more kind of stream of consciousness. So I was wondering if you felt that in this COVID landscape that we're living in now, if you find your mind working in a different way.

CURRY:

I do. It would be hard to describe exactly what that is. But time, for my personal work, has never been a factor. Some pieces I've worked on for two or three years. And so I just work until I can't think of

anything else to do or I get tired of it and want to move on. Then one of the things I've done is I'll take a work and think, "Well, maybe I'd like to do this, but if I do that, that will require a commitment to have several more days." So I'll take a photograph of it, taking it into Photoshop and diddle with it and see if I really want to make those changes. Sometimes I decide, "No, it's better off the way it was" or, "Yeah, I really want to do that."

COLLINGS:

Oh, that's interesting.

CURRY:

One of the advantages of Photoshop is I can experiment without consequences. There's one piece I've been doing where I was experimenting with proportions around two paintings that are separate, that are mirror images of each other, and experimenting with proportions of how I want to place them in relationship to one another on a single surface. I can do quickly in Photoshop without requiring a permanent commitment. And so thank you, John and Thomas Knoll, for inventing Photoshop.

COLLINGS:

Yeah. That sounds like a great technique. So while we sort of wrap up here today, aside from your COVID illness, what would you say has been most surprising about the pandemic experience so far that we're living through?

CURRY:

Let me mention one thing. Just before the virus started coming out, I developed something called trigger finger, where one of the fingers on my left hand kind of locks and I can't move it very well. It's common and, apparently, it's easy to fix. And doubtless, in my case, it was from too many flamboyant social gestures while driving. So here I am, surrounded by 17 excellent guitars and I can't play any of them.

COLLINGS:

Oh, no!

CURRY:

Yeah. So that's frustrating. But I think what surprises me about the whole COVID pandemic experience is the politicization--political polarization of it. That belief in the virus or believing it's a hoax is the result of political affiliation as opposed to hard facts and science. I think that's surprised me the most. The people that consider wearing a mask some form of tyranny is about the most ludicrous reaction I could possibly imagine. They're probably the same people who objected to wearing seatbelts or wearing helmets on motorcycles. They have no idea what tyranny is. When I hear somebody whine, "I can't get my nails done." It's like, give me a break! Talk to people who were put in cattle cars and taken to Auschwitz. Talk to the relatives of people who, in occupied France, were lined up against a wall and shot. Talk to people who have been taken over by ISIS about tyranny. Or talk to people in China, in Hong Kong. So when you call wearing a mask a form of tyranny, well, I don't feel hatred or disdain, I feel pity. If that's what you think tyranny is, then you are so divorced from any semblance of reality that all I can do is feel sorry for you. And having personally experienced this disease, having watched--

COLLINGS:

Yes.

CURRY:

Gurneys roll by my doorway with covered patients on top knowing that they won't be going home, wearing a mask is not tyranny, sorry. And if you think it is, then you're in dire need of that new surgical procedure, the plexiotomy, which is an implantation of a plexiglass window in the abdomen, so people whose heads are cramped up their nether orifice can see.

COLLINGS:

Oh, goodness. Yeah. I've talked to quite a few people who have shared that the thing that surprises the most is the politicization of the virus. Even with everything that, you know, we know about leading up to all of that, with how divided the country is and so on, that it was still, a shock and a surprise to see that.

CURRY:

Well, it stems from the head and it comes from a willfully ignorant person in charge of the country who believes in magical thinking, who has-- The greatest danger he's ever faced in life is dropping a bowling ball. And that person believes that his maintenance of power stems from deluding the gullible. That's why we have so many people who either consider the virus a hoax or a consider it, somehow, a liberal ploy or a betrayal of their political philosophy to wear a mask. When in reality, it's a sign of willingness to protect your neighbor.

COLLINGS:

Right. So despite this surprise--unhappy surprise and shock, you do still subscribe to the larger, more optimistic view, the overview-effect view that this will cause greater understanding--

CURRY:

Yes, I do. I do. And I believe that the world will ultimately benefit from this horrible experience because they have to. It's just like World War II was the most horrible conflict in human history, but yet we benefited from it, forming NATO, there's been peace in Europe, former enemies are now tight allies, the technology required to fight World War II led to widespread affordable commercial aviation travel. So I think ultimately, there will be good stemming from this, but it's going to be a long time before we see the benefits.

COLLINGS:

Okay. And as we wrap up, let me ask you, just as an aside, I know your brother is the medical director at Ohio State University Hospital?

CURRY:

Well, he's retired now. He was.

COLLINGS:

Retired now. And what has he shared with you about the situation in Ohio?

CURRY:

Our opinions are pretty much the same. And he feels that the politics of Ohio has interfered with the reality of the science of dealing with the virus, for the same reasons the nation is suffering from it. And thousands of lives are--have been lost as the result of willful ignorance.

COLLINGS:

Yeah. So Ohio and California being, you know, different environments in that respect, but--although the Ohio governor has been pretty good.

CURRY:

Yeah. Well, but there are other forces in Ohio.

COLLINGS:

Yes, definitely.

CURRY:

There's a certain Congressman who refuses to wear jackets that is a paragon of willful ignorance, apart from bad manners.

COLLINGS:

Yeah, I think Jim Jordan, perhaps you're referring to.

CURRY:

Yeah, that's it.

COLLINGS:

Okay. So--

CURRY:

I promised myself not to mention his name.

COLLINGS:

Oh, oh.

CURRY:

That's okay. But you can!

COLLINGS:

Okay. Would you like to add anything else as we--

CURRY:

Well, I just wish everybody well. I hope everybody respects the scientists that are working tirelessly to find a cure for this. And most importantly, the people on the front lines, ambulance drivers that are risking their lives, teachers that are risking their lives, and especially the nurses, the hospital staff, doctors. Those people are indeed the heroes of this situation and they deserve our respect and support. And that's another reason to wear a mask.

COLLINGS:

Yes.

CURRY:

Help them. Don't create unnecessary cases because of your own selfishness.

COLLINGS:

That's right. Very good, very good advice and a good place to end.