

Women at Warp Episode 38: Disability and Ableism in Star Trek

[bumper] Hi, this is Melinda Snodgrass and you're listening to Women at Warp. [end bumper]

[audio of LeVar Burton] It was really difficult on a weekly basis for the audience to see what Geordi saw. In fact, we never really successfully did it, in the seven years that we did Next Generation. In fact, the audience has never seen it in any of the movies, the audience has never seen what Geordi sees. Geordi sees all of the electromagnetic spectrum. That means he sees everything from infrared to x-ray. Geordi sees sound, ok? [end audio clip]

JARRAH: Hi and welcome to Women at Warp. Join us as our crew of four women Star Trek fans boldly go on our bi-weekly mission to explore our favourite franchise. My name is Jarrah. Thanks for tuning in. Today, with us we have crewmembers Andi--

ANDI: Hello

JARRAH: And Sue.

SUE: Hi, everybody.

JARRAH: We also have a very special guest, Kari. And I'm going to get you to introduce yourself and maybe tell us a bit about how you first got into Star Trek.

KARI: Yeah, sure. So as you mentioned, my name is Kari. I've loved Star Trek since early high school. I started with Voyager because I was particularly inspired by the strong female role models. I loved Janeway. I'm also planning to get my PhD in sociology. So because of that and my analytical nature, Star Trek has always been a very deep well for me to dig into, in terms of having interesting things to analyze.

JARRAH: Awesome, so today we're going to talk about disability and ableism in Star Trek but before we get into that we just have a couple housekeeping things. So first of all I just want to remind you about our Women at Warp Patreon. If you head on over to www.patreon.com/womenatwarp you can pledge a small amount and support our work. It helps us get out to conventions and print materials and things so we can spread the word. It pays for our website hosting and equipment and things like that. So thanks to everyone who's supporting us already and if you'd like to support us you can head over to patreon.com/womenatwarp. And Sue, do you want to tell our listeners about our convention schedule for the next little while?

SUE: Absolutely. So this coming week is Star Trek Las Vegas and all four regular Women at Warp hosts will be there. We will be having a meet-up during the convention. At the time of this recording there is not a set date, time or location yet but it will be on convention grounds, however outside the space where you need a ticket, so if you're going to be in the area but you don't have a ticket for the con, you can still come to the meet-up. And for more updated information on that, please check our event on Facebook. You can get there from our Facebook page – <http://facebook.com/womenatwarp>.

After Star Trek Las Vegas, I personally will be at Dragon Con and New York Comic Con, oh and Grace and Andi will be at Geek Girl Con.

JARRAH: Very exciting.

SUE: And I totally forgot about Cherry Hill. I will also be at 50 Year Mission Cherry Hill.

ANDI: With Amy.

SUE: With Amy Imhoff, who has been on the show two or three times?

JARRAH: Just once before but she'll be on again soon when we talk about Born With Teeth.

SUE: Yeah, we're putting together a panel – right now it's still a panel proposal – for New York Comic Con and we are inviting back Angelique Roche from Black Girl Nerds to join us on that as well.

JARRAH: Awesome. So let's get into our topic today. There's a lot to cover. We might not be able to cover every single episode that relates to this topic but we're going to hit some of the key ones. And like I said, the topic is disability and ableism in Star Trek and this is a topic that was actually proposed by Kari, so I'm super excited to have you on to chat about it.

We thought that we would start off by discussing some, kind of, concepts when talking about disability and ableism, for people who aren't as familiar with sociology. The first one that I wanted to bring up was, there's sort of a couple of different ways of thinking about and talking about disability, and the traditional one is referred to in sociological terms as the medical model, which basically sees the person who has a disability as a problem to be fixed, and that the problem lies within them. Whereas the social model of disability, which is preferred by a lot of disability activists, is about seeing how a person is disabled by their environment. So it isn't necessarily something about them, but it's about how the environment fails to accommodate their needs. Is that...would you say that was fairly accurate, or did you have anything to add to that, Kari?

KARI: Yes, I'd say that's a very good summary. I think that also transitions very nicely into one of my favourite sociologists, Erving Goffman. He has a book that is also one of my favorites called *Stigma: The Management of Spoiled Identity*, and one of the things that he talks about is how, when you have a handicap, especially when it's physically obvious, say you have a cane or a wheelchair like I do, you stand out. You have a physical stigma that tends to make people feel uncomfortable because of that otherness. Because you're seen as the cause of that discomfort, there's an expectation that it's your responsibility to make people feel comfortable again.

So Goffman says that common expectations are that those stigmatized have a sense of humor and joke about their handicaps, that they gratefully accept assistance from people even when it's condescending and downright unhelpful, and that they assume the role of this pitiable, dehumanized, martyrlike inspiration. They're never dejected about their condition, they're just – oh! They're so brave. And so it's really interesting because Goffman talks about how these stigmatized, handicapped individuals have to negotiate their interaction with the world, not only in a physical sense but also in a social sense.

JARRAH: Yeah, absolutely. I think we will definitely touch on some episodes that get to this issue.

ANDI: (cough) Melora (cough)

SUE: I just want to interject that we decided in advance that we would be dealing with, mostly in this episode, physical disability, and we'll be focusing an episode on mental illness at a future date, because there is so much to talk about.

KARI: There is so much.

JARRAH: Yeah, we're going to focus on physical disability issues and we're going to go sort of chronologically and start out with Captain Pike in "The Cage"-slash-"The Menagerie." So Andi, do you feel like you could maybe give a summary of this one, just super quickly?

ANDI: So basically in "The Menagerie," Spock takes over everything to remind us that there is a...the former captain of the Enterprise, Captain Pike, who is now in a wheelchair that does amazing things like blink and light up.

JARRAH: "The Menagerie" is an envelope show that enabled them to show the pilot "The Cage" again but basically in this story he is so severely disabled that he...they request to send him back to Talos IV, which is a planet that there is a death penalty on people from the Federation going there. This is where the Talosians live and basically make you live illusions, and so the end result is that he gets to live an illusion where he is young, handsome and able-bodied, along with Vina, this woman there, who is sort of deformed from being reconstructed after a terrible accident by these aliens who didn't

understand how humans worked, so that together they can live the life of perfect, fully able to walk human beings.

ANDI: Which is obviously preferable to real life, in which, you know, they could actually live the life of human beings.

KARI: Obviously.

SUE: It's apparently preferable to death too, since the penalty for returning to Talos IV is death, it's the only remaining death penalty in the galaxy, which they make a huge point of making sure we understand. So for Christopher Pike, although to his credit he says "No the entire time that they're going – he does not want to go – and Spock pulls an "I know better for you. I know what's best for you," and takes him anyway. But the implication is that disability is worse than death, because even if they get the death penalty, they want to risk it so that he can live this life, this illusion instead.

KARI: And the thing that's really frustrating is that they portray it as a preferable alternative to this miserable life that he's living right now. But the thing is, his life doesn't need to be as miserable as it is right now. They have this machine for him to make these beeps and the only thing they've taught him is "Yes" and "No." And I was pulling my hair the entire time saying, "Why do they not teach him Morse code?!" Because they make a point of saying it many times – a direct quote is: "His mind is as active as yours or mine but he's trapped inside a useless, vegetative body." They say many times that he hasn't lost any kind of mental capacity.

So not only, I mean at the very least they should teach him Morse code just to mentally stimulate him, because at the moment, he was just put in a room with a camera. There was no kind of mental engagement. All he could do was stare at a wall. That's horrible. And then, going further, I don't think that the universal translator should have any issue with translating that for people who don't actively know Morse code. So that means he can either stay as a captain in an advisory capacity, which I imagine he would want to because Starfleet officers are workaholics, or at the very least he can retire with that increased functionality.

SUE: And that description that they give over and over again about being trapped inside his body reminded me of ALS, which is also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, which is what Stephen Hawking has. And he has a more advanced system than what is even depicted in this episode, and he has it now and he's had it for several years. And it's kind of disappointing that they couldn't even, the writers of "The Menagerie" couldn't even imagine a system where this medical device has been improved over the years, that he's just in this black box, and the only thing it does is beep.

JARRAH: Yes. I feel like, and others can disagree with me, but I feel like this is basically the low point for representation of people with disabilities in Star Trek. It's pretty disappointing that, like you pointed out, that it falls into this "better dead than disabled" trope, that like, life would be so awful to be confined to the chair, and doesn't address really simple things that could've been done to help make his life better.

ANDI: I think Vina is even more disappointing because she doesn't actually have a physical disability. Like she has some mobility issues but for the most part she could live a completely normal life.

JARRAH: But she's ugly, Andi.

KARI: Exactly. That may as well be a disability for women.

ANDI: That's the end implication is that, she's not actually disabled, she's just not...no longer beautiful and so and the message being that she'd be better off on this planet rather than, you know, not be hot anymore? It's really disturbing.

JARRAH: Yeah. So any other thoughts on "The Menagerie?" I mean, I don't know if you guys want to talk about this now, but we can talk about how Captain Pike is treated definitely differently in the JJ-verse. He starts out...

ANDI: He gets injured in 2009.

JARRAH: Yes so he gets injured in 2009 and he ends up in like the floating wheelchair at the end,

SUE: But he's still being pushed by someone.

JARRAH: Yeah, that's true. I read a few articles and they generally were arguing that this portrayal was still, like, better because he was still seen as heroic, but then I read a blog by an author who refers to themselves as "Space Crip" and says that, you know, Pike is murdered by Khan in a terrorist attack on Starfleet in the first act of the film (so this is Into Darkness). "After the initial explosion, Pike tries to drag himself out of the line of fire, but the combination of his impairment, his injuries, and not having his cane leaves him struggling on the floor until Spock carries him to semi-safety. He dies soon after. But not before Spock performs a non-consensual mind meld on Pike, perhaps trying to comfort him in his dying moments a la Stark from Farscape. The telepathic contact gives Spock insight into human emotion and enables him to empathize with people facing death."

So I guess, like, what this writer is saying is, in a way it's kind of like fridging, it's referred to as the "bury your disabled" trope, which is kind of like "burying your gays," basically like they're inconvenient characters to have around. So you kill them off, but in this case it's a bit like fridging, in that Spock and Kirk are the ones whose characters benefit from Pike's death. And so that's his purpose for dying.

ANDI: Well, I mean their stories benefit.

JARRAH: Yes. Yeah.

ANDI: Well we need Kirk to face his, you know, face his mortality and have pain.

SUE: He needs to lose another father figure.

ANDI: To push him towards, you know, doing heroic things.

KARI: Exactly. I think that's pretty common to see in terms of the portrayal of disabled people is they tend to be used as a prop for able bodied people to be able to learn something, or to be able to get at a point. They're not a fully human character; they're just a means to an end. So, for example, going back to "The Menagerie," Pike had no agency. He was saying, "No, no, no, no." the whole time that they were going there, but it was still very, "Well, I'm Spock and I know better than you," and that ultimately was what they ended up with.

ANDI: Imagine only being able to say two words and having them ignored. I can't even.

KARI: That would be horrible, having that, you know, that communication barrier and then even when you're able to clearly communicate what you want, it's still going to be disregarded because obviously you are not in the same physical capacity that everyone else is, so we're just going to disregard your mental capacity. That's also something that's very common, which I want to talk about later with "Melora,"

JARRAH: Another episode that deals with disability is "Is there in Truth No Beauty?" But we are planning on doing a recap episode where we look very specifically at that episode and the character of Dr. Miranda Jones, so we're going to pass it over for the sake of this episode but promise we will discuss it in future. And we'll go right into The Next Generation and a really early episode called "Loud as a Whisper." Sue, are you able to recap this one?

SUE: Sure. This is a second season episode where there are two warring factions that have been on this planet and they've been warring for so many generations that it's no longer about whatever this was originally about, and it's about being at war, and they have—both factions have agreed to bring in this mediator called Riva and when the Enterprise goes to pick him up they learn that he is deaf. And instead of communicating with a sign language that he apparently knows, he communicates with a—essentially a chorus. And there are three members of this chorus, each representing, you know, a different part of his personality, who sort of read his thoughts and interpret them to the people around

him. And yeah, they, in the course of the episode, meet an unfortunate end, so the crew needs to find a new way to interact with and communicate with him.

JARRAH: Yeah. Kari, did you have any thoughts on this episode?

KARI: Yeah. So something that I actually really liked about this episode had more to do with Geordi because when Riva and Geordi first meet, he's really interested in Geordi's VISOR, because Riva has his way up adapting to his disability and Geordi has his. And Riva asks something along the lines of, "Don't you get angry or frustrated at this device that you're using?" and Geordi says, "Well, both my blindness and my VISOR are part of me and I really like who I am, so there's no reason to resent either one." And I thought that was really beautiful, because of how simply he describes his feelings. And it goes against that expectation of that martyr-like role where it's just this suffering victim and he's saying, "Listen, this is who I am and I have got to carry on with my life the best I can."

JARRAH: Yeah, absolutely. I really liked that scene as well. I also liked how, in this episode, it's a bit of a romance for Troi episode, like he's, Riva is, portrayed as a bit of a love interest and he's kind of hitting on her. I appreciated that because another issue that people with disabilities face is an unwillingness to see them as people with sexualities. So it was nice to see that, like such an early example that he comes in as a person who is not really, he's not portrayed as disadvantaged. He's a very clearly very intelligent person and he's a person who has-commands a lot of respect and he's a person who has a sexuality. So that was kind of cool. We did have a listener comment from Mathias. Andi, do you want to read that one?

ANDI: Sure. "As a child of deaf parents I found the way they portrayed Riva a bit silly. Instead of the gimmicky 'chorus' he could just have communicated with Troi or Data in sign language. It feels like they wanted to have a deaf character but didn't want to explore the deaf condition. It reminds me of when I was younger and store clerks wanted to speak through me and my sister instead of directly to my parents. Big props to them for casting a deaf actor for a deaf character though, that's still a problem to this day. Directors will say deaf actors can't be directed properly which is BS (see Marlee Maitlin in the West Wing and Shoshannah Stern in Jericho)", which if you haven't seen Shoshannah Stern in Jericho you should. She's awesome in it.

JARRAH: Yeah, for sure.

SUE: Yeah, Riva—when the Enterprise crew starts addressing the chorus instead of him, Riva does, I guess, say through that they need to remember to address him directly. So that's dealt with a little bit, but I certainly understand the point in this comment. But there are two other things that are a little bit disappointing for me in this episode, even though I do like it overall, and that is that in this very same episode where Geordi says he's happy with himself he's talking to Pulaski, who says that she can replicate him new eyes. And we see him considering it, and then eventually turning it down. But I felt like that was maybe a little bit unnecessary. But also after the chorus dies and Picard's trying to communicate with Riva he does the age-old practice of yelling and talking slower.

KARI: Of course.

SUE: And that doesn't help if someone's brain cannot receive auditory information, talking louder and slower is not going to make a difference.

ANDI: Overall though, I really like Riva's confidence and I really like the way that he interacts with everyone with a certain, I don't know, calm competence that I enjoy, and I think for the most part the crew interacts with him respectfully, which is nice.

JARRAH: Yeah and at the end of the day they basically decide that the way to bring these two warring factions together is that Riva is going to teach them all sign language, because, you know, you have to be all to listen and hear them, metaphorically before you can negotiate peace with them. So I thought that was kind of a cool message.

KARI: Yeah, overall I actually really liked the episode, because of many of the reasons that were mentioned. I didn't actually think about the sexuality one, so I did actually really appreciate the fact that

you brought up the sexuality. I also very much appreciated—I also forgot about the part where he stands up for himself and says, “Hey, listen you talk to me.” My chorus is just here to speak for me, because that’s something that I have encountered on a regular basis if I’m being pushed in a wheelchair. People will ask questions about me to the person pushing me in the wheelchair, with me right there. So that’s, yeah, I do remember being like, “Yeah! Stand up for yourself, Riva.”

JARRAH: Awesome. So another episode that we will do a full episode on at some point is “The Loss” so we don’t have to cover it in as great a detail right now, but I’ll open it up to thoughts and I also wanted to share a quote from Erin Hawley. She has an awesome blog called The Geeky Gimp and I’m going to share links in our show notes to you to live chats that she’s held with a lot of other awesome people commenting on how Star Trek has portrayed disability. So “The Loss” is the one where Troi loses her empathic senses and basically freaks out. And we talked about it a little bit in our women of TNG episode.

So Erin Hawley says: “I *am* glad that the show debunked the myth that blind/deaf people have superhuman senses, but it lost all credibility once Troi said ‘I am disabled.’...How can she feel indignant about something she doesn’t truly understand? Let’s humor the show for a minute and say she is disabled; has it really been long enough for her to feel so oppressed anyway? A day, if that, has passed. This takes the experiences of people with disabilities and cheapens it to some sound bites that are supposed to be thought-provoking social commentary.”

ANDI: I think she really sums it up quite nicely.

KARI: I think that’s a very good summary.

ANDI: That’s a frustrating episode.

JARRAH: I think that it’s pretty problematic for her to basically be like, “I can’t even work in Starfleet anymore,” after only a day of dealing with it. It doesn’t really do justice to the strong, resilient Troi that we see in later seasons and Picard’s comments about her, you know, becoming inspirational are just kind of condescending.

KARI: Yup and that’s very much related to something that I mentioned before with Goffman, that if you have this handicap you lose your humanity. You become an idea and have to act in a certain way so that “normals” are inspired by you and how brave you are, instead of just you being a person that something kind of shitty happened to.

JARRAH: Yeah it is like takes away your ability to legitimately express that you don’t feel good that day. Because like you said, it’s always about like how other people feel around you instead of how you feel and if you don’t feel good enough then you’re not supposed to express that.

KARI: I think that’s perfect. Yes.

JARRAH: So anything else on “The Loss?”

KARI: I think that, at the very least, if they were going to attempt something like this it should have happened on Betazed, the planet.

JARRAH: Mmmm. That would make sense.

KARI: Yeah, because when you see Lwaxana, whenever she’s around, she always speaks telepathically with her daughter, so we can assume that’s how it is usually going to be on their home planet. If you at least put them in a situation where it’s comparable to an actual disability, as opposed to keeping her in a situation where she has her full faculties - she can still walk around, she can still communicate. You know, she can still do her job. It cheapens both her as a character and the resilience that we have been led to believe she has. And it also cheapens the idea of actual disability.

SUE: Yeah and it cheapens any coping she does, because by the end of the episode she has her abilities back.

KARI: Exactly. It's one of the problems that I think Star Trek has with examining disability is that the basic kind of formula with Star Trek is there's this problem but it needs to be wrapped up nicely in an episode, or maybe it's a two-part episode, but it needs to be wrapped up. And that's just not the nature of disability, is it? It's a long process and that's uncomfortable because there's not a way to tie it up nicely. So there are these episodes where they kind of try to "get" disability but they cheapen it by wrapping it up all nicely.

JARRAH: We actually had a listener comment from Lori on Facebook who said: "The issue of disability should have been explored in whole story arcs, but was often crammed into a single show. Dorn could've done some great work (and she's referring to the episode "Ethics," which we're going to talk about next) had we followed Worf's recovery for the rest of the season. The desire to address disability was there in Trek, but never truly realized." So I think that's fairly accurate.

KARI: I think that's completely true. If we had had story arcs to examine it where it was a long, drawn-out process, I think that would have been much better than trying to sort of brush it under the rug and say, "Ok, the disability's gone now, we can go back to normal Star Trek."

JARRAH: Yeah, absolutely. So shall we move on to "Ethics?" And does anyone want to summarize that one?

ANDI: Worf gets hit by a bunch of crates and becomes paralyzed and decides that being paralyzed would be so horrible to him as a Klingon, and so dishonourable, that he would prefer death, so he asks Riker to help him commit suicide. At the same time, there's a doctor that specializes in neurology on the ship and has an idea of a new experimental treatment that might be able to completely cure him, but it could also kill him, and she and Crusher have an ethical disagreement over whether or not they should attempt the treatment.

JARRAH: Yeah. So Kari, what are your thoughts on "Ethics?"

KARI: This episode is actually—I feel a little bit torn about it as someone that has a disability, but also someone that's a sociologist at heart. And so I usually, I try to respect other cultures and things like that. So on the one hand, the way that they have Worf immediately jump to saying, "Well, I can't walk around and fight, so my life is over and I may as well die," is a bit extreme. On the other hand, the way that they present it seems reasonable in the context of being Klingon. It makes sense that a race that is focused on physical prowess and having honor on the battlefield would feel that all of their worth is tied to their physical abilities.

I think honestly my main problem with the episode ended up being was Riker, because he was the one and the main one that had an issue with Worf committing ritual suicide. But rather than saying, "Listen, I know this is your culture. I know this is the way that you have been raised, but you have worth beyond this. These are the ways that you still have worth and, and you should continue to live." He could have said that, but instead he said basically, "Your culture is bad and you should feel bad." It was basically a direct attack on his culture rather than saying, "Listen, you're my friend and I want you to live. I think you're valuable."

And so it ended up mostly bothering me because Riker portrayed responsibility as putting Riker's feelings before his feelings. We're going back to the disabled person's responsibility to carry everyone else's emotional baggage.

ANDI: I see that. I also, though, feel like Riker and Troi are the two that are reminding Worf that he has responsibilities outside of himself, specifically to Alexander, and I really felt like that needed to be said. Because that was the first thing I thought was like, "Really? You're going to commit suicide and leave your kid an orphan?" Like, mmmm. But I definitely think that that scene could have been handled differently and in a more respectful way that probably would have resonated better in the end.

JARRAH: The thing that I had the most issue with was actually Picard, who is being, like, the voice of the Prime Directive and cultural relativism. But I feel like Worf, throughout the season, you know, —there are series there are episodes where they're like, "He's a Klingon, he's a Klingon" and there's episodes where it's like, "But he's also a Starfleet officer." And I thought Picard was being extremely

inflexible and really dismissive of Dr. Crusher's very reasonable concerns.

And for someone that did grow up among humans, as much as we see him have such, you know, an affinity with, an identification with Klingon culture, it did strike me as odd that he would basically not be able to see even a 60 per cent regain in mobility as a victory and not be able to see that there is honor and courage in living in a situation that's been dealt to you like that.

SUE: Absolutely. I'll get out of the way right here that I love the Crusher storyline in this episode. That's what we're talking about. It's the Worf storyline that is really the problematic one and the thing is when you take a closer look at Klingon culture you can't really unpack it. A society in which literally everyone is a warrior wouldn't last. It would fall right apart. But I guess if you are a Klingon, where you have this honor and whatever. But you're absolutely right, Jarrah, that there is an honor in overcoming this injury that you had and staying to raise your son. And it's, once again, we've got Worf wanting to take this risk to regain mobility, implying that death, which is a very real possibility is a better option for him than disability. And there's actually a quote from the writer, Evan Carlos Somers, who is the writer of "Melora," about the episode "Ethics," and he says: "That episode had gotten a little under my skin. Even though Worf is an alien and it's just a TV show, everyone knows we're making statements with Star Trek. Messages and values are being broadcast loud and clear. I resented the message in "Ethics" that Worf is worthless now that he's disabled and therefore must kill himself. I'm sorry that portrayal had to exist at all."

ANDI: You know I actually think that the Crusher storyline is important to what we're talking about, because you have two very different doctors who are approaching this injury in very different ways. And you know people with disabilities, well people in general, but especially people with chronic disabilities, have to deal with doctors all the time. And you can have a good doctor that's going to help you live the best possible life for yourself and you can have doctors who are not going to help you on that journey.

And the medical profession can veer wildly with how respectful they are to the disabled. So I actually think the Crusher storyline is worth discussing in regards to disability and ableism because we do have this other doctor, I'm sorry I forget her name.

SUE: Toby Russell.

ANDI: OK. She seems to be excited to have found someone that is willing to risk death for her treatment. She's been trying to get this treatment on other people and nobody else would sign off on the risks. But then she has this Klingon who thinks death is better. Like, it's like the jackpot for her.

SUE: I actually covered "Ethics" with Brandon Mutala for From There to Here on the Trek.fm network and what we wound up talking about is that Crusher is in this to take care of Worf. She wants the best for him and she wants to do everything that she can to help him and to help him recover and live a long and fulfilling life, right? And then you've got Dr. Russell, whose biggest goal in the end is a medical breakthrough so that she can get praise and laurels and write up her "research" in medical journals, and it's two different aspects of medicine. There's caretaking and there's research, but there's also two different applications here of actually dealing with the patient who's in front of you and trying to do something maybe long-term that could be a game-changer.

ANDI: The other thing is too, is that Crusher was never going to bring the option to Worf. And I understand why. But I also feel like he should have been able to choose that for himself and in the end the only reason he did is because Dr. Russell took the initiative to tell him about it.

JARRAH: Yeah, absolutely, because there's, you know, wanting to do what's best for your patient but today and hopefully in the 24th century there's the idea of informed consent. And you can't fully consent to a medical treatment without being informed about your options.

ANDI: Yeah. And to me that was a little bit of Crusher deciding for Worf what was best for him without actually discussing all of the possibilities.

SUE: I have to disagree with you a little bit there, because this, what Toby Russell wants do, is an untested, unproven thing, right? Because medical treatments have to go through testing and review before they're valid treatments, and her decision is to not bring something to him that is totally untested and has never been tried. And in my opinion that's legitimate. It's not like he's in a drug trial, you know? So I don't know. I feel like that is a valid decision. But I also see your point in that Worf, the way he's behaving is sort of doing this last-ditch effort.

ANDI: Yeah and I feel like it's a valid decision too, and a responsible one. It's just it's interesting to me, because if we're talking about treating Worf, Worf specifically, not any other patient that, like, I would not have done that surgery. I would have gone for the safer 60 per cent mobility one, you know? But I'm not Worf. Worf is a risk-taker. Worf cares more about, you know, completely recovering or death is, like, basically what he wants. So, like, if you're tailoring your approach to the patient, you know what I mean? So that's actually one of the strengths of this episode is I don't think that that's an easy answer and I'm not a huge fan of Dr. Russell's kind of casual disregard for life. Not a fan of that, but in this particular case, I think they did set up an ethical dilemma for us. That's actually very interesting.

JARRAH: Yeah absolutely. Erin Hawley has another quote on "Ethics," which she actually viewed fairly positively, but particularly she says loved the ending. It shows how Worf learned that needing help isn't a dishonorable thing, and he can trust his son to give him that help. I doubt he would have been so open-minded right away if he didn't go through with the surgery and remained paralyzed, but it does give me hope that he would have come around eventually. So, you know, she's talking about how she also felt conflicted, because just the very idea of saying, like, well you have a disability so you might want to contemplate suicide is, like, pretty scary, but ultimately really liked the ending and I agree. I think it's a really touching scene where he lets Alexander see him not fully able to walk and actually help him and says look we're going to do this together. I think it shows him being a good role model. And it's just it's a pretty cool, powerful scene.

ANDI: It's definitely an arc in which Worf learns, because we have in the beginning he won't even let Alexander see him. And then he'll let Alexander see him, but he's trying to make it look like he's fine and then asking, getting very angry and asking him to leave as soon as he falls down and not wanting Alexander to see him falling. And then at the end of the episode you have him going through his physical therapy, allowing Alexander to be there and witness his struggle and help him with it. So that's a very definite character arc that you can see really clearly.

JARRAH: Absolutely. So we have one more single episode to discuss and then we're going to go back to The Next Generation and talk about the most prominent character with a disability in Star Trek, who's Geordi La Forge. But before we do that, let's check in on Deep Space Nine and the episode "Melora," which you already briefly touched on, but Sue, do you feel okay giving that a brief go for a summary?

SUE: Yeah, sure. Jarrah, I feel like we just talked about this.

JARRAH: We did! On From There to Here.

SUE: Melora is an Ensign in Starfleet and she comes from a planet that lower gravity than, I guess, the rest of the humanoids in the galaxy. Sure. But what that means is that she, her muscles do not have the strength to support her in what we would call 1G, what we would call a, you know, "normal" gravity environment. Sorry, I went a little Sue's Science Corner there for a second.

ANDI: We always love Sue's Science Corner.

SUE: But that means that in order to work and function in Starfleet that she is in a wheelchair. And she arrives on Deep Space Nine to do some experiments in the Gamma Quadrant and yeah, I mean that that takes us into it. The thing about this episode is it was, as I mentioned earlier, it was sort of written in a reaction to "Ethics" by a writer who has a disability as a response to this whole Worf storyline. But in general I think this is a really good episode. But I also think that there are some problems with it.

JARRAH: Yeah. Kari, do you want to take a stab at the problems or good things about it? I mean, I think a lot of the comments I read from people have been mixed on it, that it has some really good

things going for it, and some things that he could have done better. Like all episodes. But yeah. What are your thoughts?

KARI: I have a definite love-hate relationship with this episode. I love it because it shows the truly frustrating things about living with a handicap, it shows them in a very, very stark way. The thing that I hate about the episode is that it doesn't really realize that that's what it's doing. It portrays those frustrating things as justified and correct and it portrays Melora's frustration to her mistreatment and her reaction to that as incorrect.

So for example, one of the things that I noticed in the episode right away was she is in this wheelchair pattering around and as she's passing people, people are turning and stopping and staring at her. This is a space hub where all of these aliens are coming here and there. They see all kinds of weird things on the station all the time. But then a person in a wheelchair, that's just too much. You got to stop your day and stare at them. And probably the most frustrating part. So I loved it because I was like, yes, that's a perfect representation of what it's like. But then how they handled it I really didn't like.

So they were talking about her mission. She was going to go on some sort of mapping mission something like that in the Gamma Quadrant. And so it was Julian, Dax and the captain were talking about, talking about her and: "Well, can she handle it? Maybe someone to go with her," and then she comes in and they were like, "Oh well, we were just talking about you and if you could handle your mission, and she says, "Don't you think that's maybe a conversation I should have been a part of?"

And they gave her a lot of flak for reacting that way and being defensive and saying, "Hey, I don't need a medical opinion to know what I'm capable of," which was really, really frustrating because they were being really rude. She was fully capable of doing her job. She not only made it into Starfleet, which we've seen in various episodes is an incredible feat, but she made it through Starfleet. She graduated and she has this officer rank, but they're still treating her as an incapable person. They still won't trust her when she says, "Yeah, I can handle this."

JARRAH: Yeah, absolutely. I feel like this episode is an example, another example of something that could have been explored with more nuance if it had not just been a one-off character that needed to be gone by the end of the episode. For example, you know, this whole idea that she needs to have an attitude adjustment. Whereas, like, the characters on Deep Space Nine, with the exception of Bashir, who tries to understand her partly because he's interested in sleeping with her. But she's really the one who needs to change at the end of the day, even though Evan Carlos Somers wrote this to create a story where a person with a disability is offered a medical cure and chooses not to take it. As sort of like Geordi La Forge, like, saying I am who I am, I like who I am. I don't need to be like other people. So it has that message. But then there's this kind of muddling by the fact that the conflict is created by her responding to other people not really treating her like a full person.

SUE: She's not making the effort to make them extra comfortable. And it seems like they misconstrue that as rude.

KARI: Exactly.

SUE: And you know, for me it starts right when she arrives on the station and the chair that they give her is not the one she requested and she comments about. And they...

JARRAH: They kind of act like she's being ungrateful.

KARI: Right.

SUE: Yeah. And it's just, they're not listening. If you have good intentions and you really want to help, then listen to what someone tells you they need. This scene essentially plays out as, "We want to help you." "OK, great. Here's what I need." "That's not what you need. This is better." "But that's not what I asked for." "Well you're ungrateful."

JARRAH: So when Sue and I talked about this on From There to Here, a few people commented that, you know, they thought that Melora was actually overreacting to the way that they were treating her, and we've talked about so far on the show why we maybe don't so much agree with that.

You know it's by whose opinion? Like, if you're being treated that way all the time, it kind of adds up and it becomes easier for you to just, like, cut to the chase and be super blunt about, like, "This is what I need." "You're not listening to me." "I find that really rude." And that's OK.

But just say, for example, that her response *is* out of proportion with what would be considered reasonable. Just like, just to entertain that idea. I feel like what's really disappointing is that I feel like the default response for a Starfleet officer should always be: "I just met this person. They come from a totally different planet and culture that I have never encountered. They've had a life experience that I have never encountered and I'm going to operate by giving them the benefit of the doubt until I know them better," instead of right away jumping to, "Well, they're not meeting, like, human standards of politeness."

KARI: Right.

SUE: Excellent point.

JARRAH: So yeah. I mean, I will say that I do really like the scene where she is able to use her unique abilities to end up winning the fight in the runabout. And she also gets to have a sex life as well, so that's another example of a person with a disability, in this case, like, a much more visible disability than Riva, having an active romantic and sexual life in Star Trek. So that's very cool.

ANDI: About the rudeness aspect of it, from the way that the actress was playing it, it seems like it takes a lot of energy for her to just move around. So, like she's often out of breath, she often has a pained look on her face. To me, it seems to me that she, just in a general course of a day, is expending a lot of energy just to do basic tasks. That would make me tired. And when I'm tired, I'm grumpier. I'm less likely to, I guess, accommodate other people's feelings.

And I don't think that I'm alone there. I think that all of us have that problem. Jarrah and I get hangry quite often, like people get that way even when they don't have physical disabilities. Imagine what that would be like - every day, all day, having to deal with not only people's reaction to you but your own, you know, exhaustion trying to move around. And you know, any pain you might have, like maybe you wouldn't to be cheery all the time. I think that's OK.

SUE: I think it's really interesting that, if you think about it, the condition, I guess, that Melora has, that she is in an environment that has higher gravity than she's used to is actually something that I think everybody can imagine. Because if you think about when you're in a plane that takes off and you feel that additional pressure right at take-off. That's an additional G-force, or if you're in any kind of, like, amusement park ride that pushes you down and makes it hard to move that's an additional G-force.

JARRAH: Or just imagine that you're getting by your entire day scuba diving.

SUE: Right, but Melora is moving and is operating in that kind of environment with that kind of pressure on her entire body at all times.

JARRAH: Yeah, I mean I definitely agree. I think that this episode is a good opportunity to talk to some people about what it is like to live with a disability. And it doesn't innately have a causal effect on your mood, but I think it's totally understandable that someone who is dealing with those issues might come across as a little brusque at first and that in Starfleet your default assumption shouldn't be they have an issue. Your default position should be, "I'm not making assumptions because this person comes from such a radically different experience."

KARI: I think it's a really good point because especially as Starfleet officers they should have that experience with being accepting other cultures. That's something that I hadn't considered.

JARRAH: Yeah. I will say that if people are interested in the novels and haven't already, they should check out the Titan novels. Melora—spoilers for the novels—Melora becomes the head of Astrometrics on Riker's ship post-Nemesis, and part of the condition with her taking the assignment is that they allow her to at least partially lower the gravity in the astrometrics lab, so that she's more comfortable and also, obviously, in her own quarters. But there's interesting storylines about how she fits in with the other people on the ship, how she tries different things, sort of like the interface that Geordi has in "Interface" to interact with people on the ship without actually leaving her lower-gravity environment, and things like that, so it's cool. I definitely enjoyed getting to read more about her as an ongoing character in those books.

SUE: Apparently also one of the original concepts was that, like for the series, was that this situation where a character comes from a lower gravity environment was originally intended for Dax, to be a regular character. But it was determined that, I guess especially with the shapeshifting also happening on DS9, that the continued low-gravity scenes would be too much for the budget.

KARI: I do really, really appreciate that. Melora showed up as a character in the novels, because that was also one of the things that I found really disappointing about this episode was, like we talked about previously, they sort of, they tried to touch on disability, but they tried to cover too much in a single episode and then just kind of shove her under the rug and never talk about her again. So I was really disappointed that she never showed up again. She had decided that she wanted to live this life without that medical intervention, since it wouldn't allow her to ever return home, but then we didn't get to see in the series how that translated to her actual work. So I very much appreciate that they did explore her character in the novels.

JARRAH: All right. So we've been talking for a while, and we need to get to arguably the most important character with a disability in Star Trek, certainly the most visible regular, which is Geordi La Forge from Star Trek: The Next Generation. So does anyone want to start with how they feel like Geordi was portrayed, or any particular highlights or lowlights they wanted to talk about? We mentioned briefly the scene in "Loud as a Whisper." I'll just briefly say another scene that is similar to that that I liked is in "The Masterpiece Society," where he tells off these eugenicists. You know, he can't really get behind them because in their society he wouldn't even exist, and he knows he's somebody who is has an existence that's worth while.

SUE: There's a similar scene with Romulans, I think?

ANDI: "The Enemy." That's a great episode in general. I like that episode. For one thing Geordi is like action hero. But one thing that I like about it is the Romulans, the Romulan actually takes the time to tell him that they wouldn't have allowed him to live in their society. It's like, "Thanks, bro." And then later on it's his VISOR that saves them. So I really like that kind of message there that no, Geordi is not exactly like everybody else, but he has strengths outside of that.

JARRAH: Absolutely, and I think it was a really cool idea by Gene Roddenberry to start him off as the navigator, to be the blind man flying the ship. But obviously he got changed out of that role, but then he still has an incredibly important role and he's shown to be very competent and adept at engineering.

ANDI: I also really like the scene in...I think it's a Klingon episode, I think, where they connect his VISOR to the viewscreen on the bridge and Picard's like completely geeking out. "Heart of Glory?"

JARRAH: Yeah, "Heart of Glory," I think, a season one episode, I think, where they find this Klingon ship and Geordi's on and Picard is just, like, really wowed by how different it is to see things through Geordi's VISOR.

ANDI: I just think it's cool that they literally let people see through his eyes.

KARI: Mmm yeah. And that's that's something that I really liked about him as a character is that they had several episodes where he not only just functioned adequately, but he was actually a unique asset, where he could see some sort of radiation that they wouldn't have been able to see normally or they were able to adapt his VISOR in some, some unique way to solve a problem. So there were several situations where, if they hadn't had him around, and they hadn't had him with his unique

abilities, they would have been in a much tighter situation.

JARRAH: Yeah, like I was just watching "Interface," which is the one where he is attached to a probe and he thinks he finds his dead mother. In that case the alien that is masquerading as his mother had been trying to contact this other ship, but it ended up accidentally killing everyone on the ship. But because Geordi is interfaced through his VISOR in this special suit, he's able to actually end up communicating with this creature and end up saving them. So that was pretty cool, I thought.

SUE: Yeah. Geordi maintains this, "I like myself. The VISOR is part of me. This is who I am," mentality through the series, but then it gets a little convoluted in the movies. He does at some point get the ocular implants, which are essentially still the VISOR. They're just, they just look like eyes, I guess to remove the obvious othering, which is something we can talk about. BUT then in Insurrection his eyes regenerate because of the radiation on that planet. But apparently after they leave the Ba'ku world and the radiation dissipates, he has to have the ocular implants again. And it's a little strange and confusing at times, but he definitely has this whole scene in Insurrection about how he'll never see the sunset or the sunrise again. But he saw it before. I mean visible light is one thing. I would love to see a sunset through Geordi's eyes in infrared and ultraviolet and see what's going on in the other, in the rest of the electromagnetic spectrum..

KARI: Yeah. That actually reminds me of I don't know if you have seen Battlestar Galactica, but it makes me think of one of the Cylons. Later on, he talks about how he's so frustrated that he was made with this fleshy body, and how he saw this supernova and he saw it with these ridiculous gelatinous orbs in his skull and he doesn't want to see it that way. He wants to, he wants to hear radiation. He wants to, he wants to do all these really interesting things that he normally would be able to do if you were a machine and how this more human body that he had was, he considered it completely inferior. That's what I immediately thought of with you talking about that is, yeah, a sunset would be way more interesting with a VISOR.

JARRAH: Yeah, absolutely or at least like different, and it should be fascinating from a Starfleet perspective.

ANDI: I think we can add Geordi to the list of characters that had very strange and regressive characterization in the movies, as well as Data and Picard.

JARRAH: But I think you know occasionally in the show, and I mean in Generations as well, he does also become a victim that needs to be rescued because of his VISOR. Not all the time. I don't think it's the overwhelming trait. But you know there's, well in Generations he's captured and then the VISOR is used to spy on the crew. And there are certainly other episodes where he's put at a disadvantage because his VISOR falls off or his VISOR is used against him.

KARI: And I think that that's an aspect where—so I really I love Geordi as a character and I love that he is portrayed as someone that isn't just, like his life isn't pathetic and pitiable because he has this disability. But on the other hand I feel like he sort of gets into the zone where he's sort of the disabled version of a "manic pixie dream girl," where, I mean just because a disabled person doesn't want to be seen as broken, incapable and someone to pity, that doesn't mean that they're not occasionally going to say to themselves, "This sucks. I'm not having a good time with this." And I think especially in episodes where he's made to be completely helpless, where he's made to be a victim, I think it would be appropriate to have some sort of follow-up episode to give him that humanity, to show that he's not just here to make all of the people without handicaps feel comfortable and be like, "He's fine! He's cool with it." Like, no. There are going to be days I'm sure that he doesn't feel good.

In the episode that we mentioned previously, I think it was "Loud as a Whisper," where Pulaski says, "Hey, I can give you these more normal-looking eyes." He and her talk about how he has headaches every single day. So not only is there this disabling factor, but there's also the presence of constant pain. So there are going to be days that he's not going to be having a good time. There were episodes with Picard, say, where he was—when he was assimilated into the Borg and he had to deal with the emotional ramifications of that in future episodes. I think it would be appropriate for there to be follow-up episodes, at least one after he's put in a victimizing situation, where he says, "Yo, Troi, I'm feeling

pretty bad about this right now. That wasn't fun."

JARRAH: Yeah. Well, I feel like the portrayal of Geordi tends to be that he's someone who isn't very good at expressing emotions. He, you know, we obviously see him as, in some questionable romantic situations. And in "Interface" he is upset with Picard for forcing him to see Troi when they think that his mother might be dead. But I think that it's positive that he's shown to have those different traits and they aren't anything—it's not like *because* he has a disability. He's like, this is just because he's a person and people have different personality traits.

KARI: I do like that.

SUE: I just think it's important that he's there.

JARRAH: Absolutely.

SUE: And he's there in nearly every episode. So that character being competent, being an engineer, having skills that are required to run the flagship of the Federation – it's normalizing.

JARRAH: Yeah. Well, I mean it shows, you know, he's part of a team of people who are our heroes and the color of his skin and the fact that he wears a VISOR in order to see don't make him any less of a part of this group of heroes. And that's pretty cool. It's important. Representation matters and it's important to see someone who's a person with a disability and also a person of color in this really key role on the ship, who's an intelligent scientist and engineer and trusted by his fellow crew members.

KARI: I completely agree. I think that even though he is not a perfect representation, I think the fact that he's a frequent main character and he's frequently very positive, I think that's very important and much better than a lot of shows can say.

JARRAH: We have a comment from Amber, do you want to read that before we close out the episode?

SUE: Absolutely. "I'm only really an expert on TNG but I find the treatment of disabilities on TNG to be similar to issues like sexuality, race, and gender (et al): well-intentioned but clumsy. For people like me who grew up without a lot of firsthand experience with things like Deafness or blindness, episodes like the one with Riva were interesting and eye-opening. But now I watch it and I think, 'Is that really the best way they could have done that?' I am also annoyed that for all of Geordi's speeches about how he likes his VISOR because it's part of him, he went and got eye implants anyway."

JARRAH: Yeah.

SUE: I think overall in the Trek series, especially since we're talking mostly about TOS/TNG/DS9, are products of their time in the sense that the people creating the show were like looking at the future, right? As Gene Roddenberry's vision of: "There will be no sickness. There will be no hunger. There will be no greed," and looking unfortunately upon disabilities as something to be cured. And I feel like it has been really since Star Trek in general has been off the air that the movement of, "I don't need a cure. This isn't something that needs to be fixed. I'm not broken," has really become more prevalent. So I wonder what, you know, the new series will do with tackling disability and ableism because hopefully it will be more inclusive and less, "We need to fix this."

JARRAH: Yeah, absolutely I think that's really well put. And just like, just to be clear, when we're talking about the medical model of disability, this isn't, it's not about saying, you know, someone with a disability shouldn't seek medical treatment or medical assistance. Certainly having a relationship with a doctor who treats you like a knowledgeable human being about your own needs is awesome. But the thing is that society needs to stop seeing this as an individual problem with, like, if only we could just fix that one person, and start looking at what can we do holistically to make our environment better for people with disabilities to live in, both in terms of how we relate, in terms of not putting all the burden on people with disabilities to make everyone else comfortable, but also in terms of like physical structures and other types of assistance to make content and spaces accessible. So we're going to be transcribing this episode as one, like very, very, very small thing that we can do. And yeah.

KARI: Awesome.

JARRAH: All right. So thank you so much for joining us today, Kari, where can people find you elsewhere on the internet?

KARI: You can find me on YouTube just by looking up my name. And I also have an Etsy store called Stitches and Stoneware, where I sell things like nerdy plushies.

JARRAH: Awesome, and we will put the links to those on our show notes, as well as links to other articles that we referenced, including the awesome panel series by the Geeky Gamp on Star Trek and disability. Andi, where can people find you on the internet?

ANDI: Easiest place is Twitter @FirstTimeTrek, where I'm live-tweeting my first time through Star Trek.

JARRAH: And Sue.

SUE: You can find me on Twitter @spaltor or over at <http://anomalypodcast.com>.

ANDI: Also the main host of Sue's Science Corner!

JARRAH: Sue's Science Corner! And I'm Jarrah and you can find me on tumblr at <http://trekkiefeminist.tumblr.com> and on Twitter @jarrahpenguin. If you'd like to contact our show or check out those aforementioned show notes, you can visit <http://womenatwarp.com>. You can also e-mail us at crew@womenatwarp.com or visit us on Facebook or on Twitter @womenatwarp, or leave us an iTunes review. So thanks for listening.