Across the Cosmos November 2026:
Zooniverse – The Lessons of Stories

Science fiction stories played a large role in my decision to become a scientist; however, it wasn't just the science that appealed to me. I've frequently said that good science fiction starts with what is, envisions what might be, and explores what should be. It raises ethical, philosophical, and theological or religious questions. It tells modern-day parables, and, much like the prophets of ages past, predicts consequences of human actions. It tells good stories. As clergy know, and many scientists have come to realize, stories are powerful catalysts for communicating ideas and provoking deeper thought.

When the new Zooniverse project, The Lessons of Stories, was announced on election day, I immediately thought that many CLP members might be interested in participating! The research team wants help from volunteers to "study the moral choices of characters in books, movies, and beyond." In the words of the project's leader, "Stories help us see what it feels like to choose and sacrifice values in our everyday lives. With your help we can better understand the values and their tensions illustrated by stories from around the world."

The researchers note that every story in the project was written by real people, and AI is only used to condense existing stories into short moral choice cards. The cards never suggest which values are involved. Volunteers read the cards and identify the specific values that are promoted or sacrificed through the scenarios. You can find more details about the research, including a description of the moral values, which are drawn from Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values, here.

I strongly encourage you to go to the website and learn more about this fascinating project – I'd be willing to bet that participation might even generate some ideas for sermons, and I'm sure the research team would appreciate your feedback through the discussion board. I'd love to hear what you think, too, so I invite you to email me as well with your comments!

Until next month,

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