



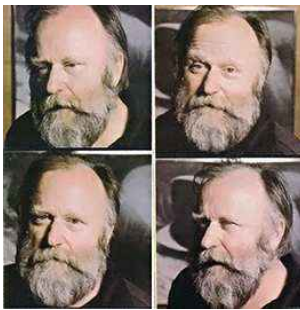
## Frank Herbert: Science Fiction Author

*An interview with Frank Herbert: science fiction author, yellow journalist, and a homesteading technopeasant.*

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<https://www.motherearthnews.com/nature-and-environment/frank-herbert-science-fiction-author-zmaz81mjzraw>

**By Pat Stone**



*Frank Herbert was thoughtful and opinionated.*

**MOTHER EARTH NEWS STAFF**

*By profession, Frank Herbert is a science fiction author — and quite a successful one at that. Indeed, many of his novels are regarded as classics in the field. What's more, a major film studio is well into a years-long project to convert Frank's Dune tales into a feature-length motion picture.*

*Of course, Herbert has written other distinguished fiction as well, but a list of his literary achievements would hardly serve to sum up this unique individual. The Washington State author staunchly maintains that any person's life should consist of much more than his or her work role (even if that role is a prominent one). He puts a lot of energy into his "nonprofessional" time. In keeping with his beliefs, Frank's a devoted father, spouse, and family man. He's also an avid alternative energy experimenter who's created his own solar collector, windplant, and methane fuel generator, all on an Olympic Peninsula homestead.*

*Equally important, Mr. Herbert is an outgoing social commentator who combines a strong sense of traditional values with a radical's zest for questioning (and even parodying) the basic assumptions of our culture. Staffer Pat Stone—after being sent out to Port Townsend, Washington to talk with Frank—had this to say about his encounter with the creator of the exotic, water-poor planet, Dune:*

*"Interviewing Frank Herbert was both a truly enjoyable and sometimes frustrating experience. The man seems charged with energy. He has an active and impish sense of humor—we did a lot of laughing—and a warm, hospitable nature that truly touched me. At the same time, though, Mr. Herbert's answers often bewildered me with their unexpectedness. He obviously relished escaping any attempts to 'pigeonhole' his ideas, and even mimicked my role as interviewer by taking my picture once while I was photographing him! I tell you, at times I felt like a bit character in one of his novels who attempts—usually in vain—to keep up with the words of the book's brilliant protagonist."*

*Frank Herbert's ideas concerning the serious problems facing our society today and how we might successfully deal with them are often challenging and present a strong counterpoint to the views of his fellow science fiction writer, Isaac Asimov (<http://www.motherearthnews.com/nature-and-environment/science-technology-isaac-asimov-zmaz8osozraw.aspx>). All of us here at MOTHER EARTH NEWS hope that you find the author/homesteader's concepts and anecdotes—as presented in the edited transcript that follows—to be as thought-provoking as we have.*

**PLOWBOY:** Mr. Herbert, a little voice in the back of my mind keeps telling me that many readers of MOTHER EARTH NEWS' will probably wonder why our do-it-yourself, ecology-oriented magazine is interviewing a prominent science fiction writer.

**HERBERT:** Who, me? A science fiction writer? I've always considered myself to be a yellow journalist.

**PLOWBOY:** I beg your pardon?

**HERBERT:** Like the best muckraking yellow journalists of the news media, I ask questions that other people aren't asking, and do a lot of investigating into the world around me. So even though I try to write entertaining, future-oriented stories, my books always contain messages that—I believe—are relevant to our situation today.

**PLOWBOY:** So you use your futuristic fiction to comment on *contemporary* problems?

**HERBERT:** Yes, but don't think that's *all* I try to do when I write. People don't buy my books because they think they're going to learn something from them. The fact is, if you told somebody, "Listen, I'm going to teach you a lesson that's so important it might even change your life," that individual might say, "Oh boy, do that!" But if you then did instruct the person as you promised—and that's all you did—he or she would resent it.

So I try to give my readers real entertainment as well as my point of view. They can take either one, or both!

**PLOWBOY:** How did you begin your career as a "writer with a message"?

**HERBERT:** Oh, I knew what I wanted to do with my life even when I was quite young. In fact, on my eighth birthday I told my family, "I'm going to be a author."

**PLOWBOY:** They must have been tempted to take that remark as a joke.

**HERBERT:** Well, I got kidded a lot as a result of my statement, but—in truth—I've never really strayed far from that goal. I was employed as a newspaper writer for many years, and I took those jobs because I saw the field as a training ground that would financially support my own writing while helping me learn to use the tools of my trade. In addition, I put in some time as a radio and television commentator. And I've done a lot of photojournalism work. I was picture editor of the San Francisco Examiner for quite a few years.

**PLOWBOY:** Then did you glean the "message themes" for your fiction from exposure to contemporary news events?

**HERBERT:** Heck, no. I developed all of my basic ideas during my childhood years on our family's farm.

**PLOWBOY:** You were a farm boy?

**HERBERT:** I milked cows—by hand—for over half of my early childhood years on a small subsistence farm in Kitsap County, Washington. And I can still clench my hands like you wouldn't believe.

**PLOWBOY:** You must have had other chores, too.

**HERBERT:** Oh, yes. There were pigs to feed, and I had corn and such to hoe. I once even reared and canned 500 chickens as a 4-H project. We raised all our own food, so—although I grew up during the Depression—I never had to worry about being hungry. In fact, I remember those "bad years" as marvelous times because I spent them in the company of a kind of large, extended family. My father had six brothers, so I never lived far from aunts and uncles, and I had cousins all over the landscape.

And I learned, from childhood, that the family experience can be very important to an individual. Family life teaches a person to shoulder his or her share of responsibility. It's also quite a supportive structure ... and can stage rituals in which all of the members are able to participate. A child can develop a sense of self-reliance and self-worth through involvement in such activities.

**PLOWBOY:** Did you work on your plans to be "*an author* " during those farm days?

**HERBERT:** Yes, I used to write awful poetry and crude childish stories. I got my best storytelling practice, though, from being the yarn-spinner for all my cousins. Whenever the whole family got together, we youngsters would go off someplace by ourselves. The other children would come up with a title—something like "The Blood and the Vow"—and I'd have to make up a tale that fit it ... one that, often as not, would scare the wits out of them.

**PLOWBOY:** How did you develop the concepts that have become the "hidden" messages in your stories?

**HERBERT:** First of all, my childhood days gave me some rock-ribbed ideas about the ways people should live together. To put my beliefs simply: I think we ought to be loyal to our friends, we ought to be truthful, we ought to be supportive of family members, and we ought to provide one another with help directly instead of delegating our good deeds to institutions.

I don't like governmental "helping"—or any kind of public charity system—because I learned early on that our society's institutions often weaken people's self-reliance and damage family bonds as well. Take education, for instance. The teaching of our young ought to be about equally divided between the family, which should lay the ground-work for the child's learning, and professionals who can pass on useful knowledge that the child's relatives might not have in their repertoire. Today, though, the professional education establishment assumes that the family doesn't know what its own members need or want. The result is a classic failure: an institutionalized system that does more harm than good.

Do you know that—in response to just that problem—my own family left the United States twice? On both occasions we went to live in Mexico because I was not considered "qualified" to teach my children in the U.S., but could home-school them in Mexico. Our youngsters were taught at home when they were young, and they haven't suffered in the least from it.

**PLOWBOY:** So you think our country's methods of instruction have a lot to do with the destruction of many family values?

**HERBERT:** Absolutely. By the time you have three or four generations of people who are taught not to trust their families and their families' knowledge, individuals can really become separated from their roots. The effect is to make people feel like lost wanderers, or to cause them to think of themselves only in the role of their jobs, which is a complete misrepresentation of what it means to be alive.

Another lesson I learned in childhood is that what people do is just as important as—and maybe more so than—what they say. I had a marvelous object lesson in the difference between words and actions when I was in fourth grade. In those days I was bored to death by school, so I tended to cause a lot of trouble.

One day our teacher, a great big woman who wore eye-glasses that looked like the bottoms of pop bottles, caught me in the middle of a particularly heinous prank. She told me to stay after school and added, "I just don't know what I'm going to do with you."

Of course, I could imagine all kinds of horrible things she might do to me. Like the bastinado, or worse! But when school was over, she just made me sit and sit while she worked on papers. After what seemed like ages, she motioned me up to her desk, stared at me awhile—I could feel two holes being burned right through me—and then resumed her paperwork.

**PLOWBOY:** You must have been terrified.

**HERBERT:** Oh, I was. Finally, she put her pencil down and said, "I just don't know what I'm going to do with you." Well, it was all too much for me. I started to cry. She put her face right in front of mine then and said again!—"I just don't know what I'm going to do with you." And I said through my sobs, "Why are you mad at me?"

With that, she grabbed me by the shoulders, began shaking me roughly, and cried, "I'm not mad at you, I'm not mad at you!" Well, I now know that teachers get long lectures during their training on the importance of keeping their tempers with their students, so I had said exactly the wrong thing to this woman. I may not have understood that at the time, but I didn't have a bit of trouble realizing that my teacher—who was repeatedly screaming, "I'm not mad at you!"—was nearly out of her mind with rage.

That incident drove home the lesson that what people say often doesn't agree with what they actually do. And that discovery played a big part in the shaping my thinking and behavior.

**PLOWBOY:** Do you try, in your own life, to keep a consistent thread between words and actions, then?

**HERBERT:** Absolutely. I already told you that family bonds are very important to me, and that we left the country to be able to teach our own children. There were also years—when our youngsters were quite small—that Bev, my wife, was the family's major income earner. She went out to the office and brought in a paycheck, while I stayed home and did the cooking, laundry, and housekeeping, took care of the children, and worked on my writing.

Our children are grown up now, but I still participate in family rituals. In fact, my niece called me last night, and I've got to change a previous appointment and go down to Eugene, Oregon because she's graduating from the university there.

I also feel strongly—and act on my feelings—that individuals should take their own steps to be more self-reliant and to lessen their impact on our environment.

**PLOWBOY:** What have you done to live that belief?

**HERBERT:** Did you see the solar collector on the side of our house? That's what's heating our home. Now I didn't say to myself that I'd wait until we could get all our heat, all the time, from solar energy, or that putting up a collector would disrupt the beautiful lines on this already constructed house, or that I wouldn't build the heater until we could come up with a way to store the warmth. I simply decided to build an inexpensive collector—the device's sun-catching "tracking rings" are made from recycled beer cans—in order to use solar heat when I can. You see, people keep looking for an absolute final solution, often waiting to use alternative technology until they can build an energy-saving house from scratch, when there are many intermediate steps available to us.

Bev and I also grow all our own vegetables. We live in an area that has what the U.S. Department of Agriculture describes as "poverty soil." So, when we moved here eight years ago, I paid \$200 to have peat hauled in by truck and dumped in the stone terraces out back. Our neighbors laughed at us for spending all that money on peat ... but the vegetable crops we grew in those walled beds paid us back that investment in just a year and a half.

I also have an attached greenhouse ... I'm slowly but surely thermopaning all the house's windows ... I intend to add a solar collector over our swimming pool building to heat its water ... and—for a time—I even raised chickens to provide manure for my methane experiments.

In addition, a friend—John Ottenheimer—and I have invented a wind machine. Our device is built on a vertical axis, a feature which allows us to transmit the power quite easily to the ground and keeps the device from being "torqued down" by sudden wind shifts. Our machine can withstand a 100-knot gust, yet can be built out of plastic, wood, or any of a variety of inexpensive materials.

**PLOWBOY:** Are you marketing this windplant?

**HERBERT:** Not yet, but we intend to. We're still testing and refining the design. We've been working on it for five years.

Another way I try to do my bit for ecology and alternate lifestyles is by bringing "movers and shakers"—men and women like the officers of Weyerhaeuser Tree Company—out here to see our place. I think it's extremely important to reach people who are making decisions that will affect the lives of us all, and to show them that you don't have to be "a kook living in a tipi"—that image is meant to describe their way of thinking, not my own—to be interested in supplying some of your own energy and food.

So I do try to express my concerns about family, social, and environmental values in my life, as well as in my writing.

**PLOWBOY:** I couldn't agree more that it's important to be consistent in one's actions and words. But when you talk about expressing such values in your writing, you're referring to your later work as a science fiction writer and not to your earlier, purely reportorial work, right?

**HERBERT:** Oh, you'd be surprised how many of my views I was able to get across in my newspaper days. I was known as a strange rebel who wrote very outspoken stuff. But people would read what I wrote, and that sold newspapers.

I'll give you an example. I was a war correspondent in Vietnam for a while. I became utterly disgusted with our military command there because it was quite obvious, to anyone in the field, that our "leaders" were lying to correspondents and to the American public.

So one of my stories documented the profound corruption, in the Thieu government, that was costing the American taxpayers millions of dollars. In one instance, the military ordered enormous lots of steel to repair our river barges. The steel just happened to turn out to be the wrong gauge for our barges, but—surprise!—was exactly right for use on the boats being built at the nearby Thieu family barge factory. And gosh, before long that steel just vanished without a trace. That chain of events could never have happened unless people in our military were profiting along the way.

I got my facts on this and other instances of corruption, flew off to Copenhagen—in those days, you didn't want to be in Vietnam when you filed a story denigrating the powers that be, for fear that you might fall victim to a war zone "accident"—and sent in a complete story on this conspiracy of lies and greed. It was a "big blast" type of article and was banner headlined in every Sunday edition of the Hearst newspapers all around the country.

It so happens that Bill Hearst, Jr—who does a regular column for the Sunday editions—was also writing about the Vietnam war that day, only he presented a much rosier picture of our war effort than the one I had developed while being there. Yet Bill thought it was a great idea to run our opposing views, together, on the front page, because the resulting controversy sold lots of papers.

**PLOWBOY:** So you were often able to get away with such "brazen" journalism?

**HERBERT:** Yes, primarily because I could write well—allowing people to understand what I was saying—and I wrote sincerely, presenting my outward bias honestly and then, reporting what I saw.

**PLOWBOY:** How did you become interested in writing science fiction?

**HERBERT:** I started out doing adventure stories, and actually tried my hand at quite a number of fiction types. Still, science fiction ultimately attracted me. The genre has unlimited elbowroom, which permits me to create any kind of setting I want for whatever story I want to tell. Most important, in science fiction I can work with entertaining and dramatic stories that have analogues to the present situation. That way I can get past people's guard and really talk to the basic human beings within.

**PLOWBOY:** One thing I've noticed in reading and thinking about your books is that every society you describe seems to have glaring faults ... no matter how noble the intentions of its creators. For instance, the most positive social system I saw in any of your works was the community described in *The Santaroga Barrier*. [EDITOR'S NOTE: This book portrays an isolated city that does not participate in American consumerist society. Commercial corporations send an agent in to uncover Santaroga's secrets and to attempt to subvert the community.]

At first impression, *Santaroga* appeared to be far superior to normal American society. The people were cooperative, peaceful, and happy. But by the time I reached the end of the book, I'd become aware of flaws in the community that seriously compromised its virtues.

**HERBERT:** I wrote *The Santaroga Barrier* with the hope that half the book's readers would end up saying, "Oh boy, what a nifty society. I'd like to live there" and the other half saying, "You wouldn't catch me dead in that place." The underlying message, then, was that one person's utopia is another person's dystopia or worst possible world—and that any attempt to create a perfect society will fall into the trap of replenishing itself only from itself, and ignoring those differences between people that give us strength as human beings.

**PLOWBOY:** That's not the kind of one-sided viewpoint a reader might expect to find in the work of an author who professes to "preach" in his fiction. *Soul Catcher*, like *The Santaroga Barrier*, also seemed to be making strong negative statements about American society ... only in that book the not entirely positive alternative was native American culture, a society many people think of as being—or, at least, having been—close to perfect. [EDITOR'S NOTE: In *Soul Catcher*, a spiritually powerful Indian kidnaps the son of a prominent politician with the intention of slaying the innocent youth as part of a ceremonial revenge. One important aspect of the ritual is that the victim must agree to the slaying.]

**HERBERT:** *Soul Catcher* described a collision between two mythologies, those of the native American world and of the European immigrant culture. And, in truth, this very real collision has not yet completed its shaking-down process. Indeed, the two societies still have some grave misunderstandings about each other. Many people, for instance, think that the Indians were the best ecologists this land has ever seen. I don't think that's necessarily true. Some native American cultures were actually quite hard on their environments. They were just slower—because their populations were small—at causing damage than the whites were.

**PLOWBOY:** Really?

**HERBERT:** Some tribes practiced several forms of massive kill—such as driving buffalo off of cliffs—which were sure to improve the lot of the people doing so at the expense of those who didn't. But since the rate of the environmental change resulting from such acts was too slow to be encompassed by most people's awareness of time, many men and women think that the native American societies could have lived in harmony with their environment forever if they'd just been left alone.

**PLOWBOY:** I must admit I've always believed that to be true. How do you perceive humanity's relationship with the environment today?

**HERBERT:** I look upon our involvement with the environment—and by the way, all of man's intrusions into the environment are totally natural phenomena—as a continual learning process in which there are no absolutes. Whatever we do causes changes, and we can cause gross disruption to our surroundings as a result of small-order determinations.

**PLOWBOY:** That statement would certainly seem to be supported by the events that occur in your *Dune* novels. [EDITOR'S NOTE: In *Dune*, *Dune Messiah*, and *Children of Dune*, Herbert portrays generations of life and government on a harsh desert planet. The world's native people, the *Fremen*, are amazingly well adapted to living in a low-moisture environment. In an attempt to improve the lot of the citizens, *Dune*'s aristocratic rulers work to increase the available water in the environment.] The major change people tried to effect on *Dune* was to bring moisture to the desert. That clearly seemed a desirable goal.

**HERBERT:** Yes, *Dune* was so arid that the very idea of water coming down from the skies in rain, and of great rivers flowing over the land, conjured up visions of paradise. But when that one change was made, it had a regular "domino theory" series of consequences that hadn't been anticipated. Indeed, by the time *Dune* reached the stage described in my fourth desert planet book—*God Emperor of Dune*—the changes had pretty well eliminated individualism!

**PLOWBOY:** Why? Why did you choose to portray the effects of such a seemingly desirable change as being so disastrous?

**HERBERT:** I felt that the historical interrelationship between the native Fremmen and their desert planet had created what amounted to a religion. They had learned not to question the way to behave in their environment, but to act in certain ways on faith. They were locked into their system. So, even when the environment changed, the people didn't change their social mythology, their values, or their ways of relating to one another.

**PLOWBOY:** In other words, they failed to alter their own part of the planet's ecology.

**HERBERT:** That's right. You see, I think there are such things as psychological ecology, religious ecology, economic ecology, etc. And none of them can exist in a vacuum. They're all interrelated. So whenever we make decisions and put them into effect, we ought to review and assess all the potential results.

The people I distrust most are those who want to improve our lives but have only one course of action in mind.

**PLOWBOY:** There must be a lot of folks—including many who call themselves environmentalists—who aren't in agreement with your thinking about the relation between humans and ecology.

**HERBERT:** Yes, there certainly are. Too many ecologically concerned individuals seem to think that simply getting rid of one noxious environmental pollutant—whether that "culprit" be nuclear power, commercial pesticides, or whatever—will solve all our problems.

**PLOWBOY:** I wouldn't think that most science fiction writers share your concerns, either.

**HERBERT:** The bulk of science fiction authors—and there are some notable exceptions to this rule—are heavily into what I call the technological toy syndrome.

Writers and scientists who believe that technology alone can solve problems have fallen into a common scientific fallacy: the belief that science can answer any question in absolute terms, that it's possible to reduce phenomena to one explanation that will operate in a vacuum. That's not the way the universe appears to me. And it quite clearly didn't appear that way to Albert Einstein or Werner Heisenberg, either.

**PLOWBOY:** I appreciate the fact that you don't set up one-sided simplistic solutions, but do you have any positive approaches to handling our problems? There weren't—to my knowledge—any truly promising systems, governments, or leaders described in any of your books that I've read.

**HERBERT:** There is definitely an implicit warning, in a lot of my work, against big government and especially against charismatic leaders. After all, such people—well-intentioned or not—are human beings who will make human mistakes. And what happens when someone is able to make mistakes for 200 million people? The errors get pretty damned BIG!

For that reason, I think that John Kennedy was one of the most dangerous presidents this country ever had. People didn't question him. And whenever citizens are willing to give unreined power to a charismatic leader, such as Kennedy, they tend to end up creating a kind of demigod—a leader who covers up mistakes instead of admitting them—and makes matters worse instead of better. Now Richard Nixon, on the other hand, did us all a favor.

**PLOWBOY:** You feel that Kennedy was dangerous and Nixon was good for the country?



**HERBERT:** Yes, Nixon taught us one hell of a lesson, and I thank him for it. He made us distrust government leaders. We didn't mistrust Kennedy the way we did Nixon, although we probably had just as good reason to do so. But Nixon's downfall was due to the fact that he wasn't charismatic. He had to be sold just like Wheaties, and people were disappointed when they opened the box.

I think it's vital that men and women learn to mistrust all forms of powerful, centralized authority. Big government tends to create an enormous delay between the signals that come from the people and the response of the leaders. Put it this way: Suppose there were a delay time of five minutes between the moment you turned the steering wheel on your car and the time the front tires reacted. What would happen in such a case?

**PLOWBOY:** I guess I'd have to drive pretty slowly.

**HERBERT:** V-e-rrrrrr-y slowly. Governments have the same slow-response effect. And the bigger the government, the more slowly it reacts. So to me, the best government is one that's very responsive to the needs of its people. That is, the least, loosest, and most local government.

**PLOWBOY:** For the past few decades, though, power seems to have been getting more and more concentrated by big business and centralized authority. We've clearly been moving in the opposite direction from what you'd prefer.

**HERBERT:** I don't think that has to continue. I feel that as communication systems improve—and with the new computers that are continually being developed, communications are coming on like gangbusters—people won't be so dependent on the often one-sided reporting of the conventional media for their information. Folks will see that we can take control of some social functions now handled by big government—schools, taxation, whatever—and that the "bigger and stronger is always more effective" idea is a phony bill of goods.

So I see an evolutionary movement toward a certain kind of fragmentation, and not just because of improvements in communications.

**PLOWBOY:** What other factors do you think will influence this decentralization?

**HERBERT:** We've opened up the Pandora's box of violent technology. We're fast approaching a time when one person can make and employ instruments of violence equal to the ones formerly reserved only to massive governments.

Let's face it, our society has a tiger by the tail in technology. We can't let go. We can't all go back to the farm and be self-sufficient. There isn't enough land to do so, for one thing. Furthermore, people's expectations for their lifestyles have been raised, and you don't monkey around with human expectations. So what we need is a new way of relating to our society and its tools. And it was in an attempt to envision just such a change that, some 15 years ago, I coined the phrase "technopeasantry."

**PLOWBOY:** How would you define technopeasantry?

**HERBERT:** It involves drawing support from technology, but doing so *imaginatively*. We have to ask the question, "What elements of technology should I use and how should I use them?" A peasant knows, you see, when and why to grab a shovel or a hoe. In the same way, we have to think out our own relationship to the complete environment, our own values and technological options, and make decisions consciously.

Too often today people don't examine or question their basic assumptions. Let me give you an example. I once taught a course at the University of Washington that was called Utopia/Dystopia. It was billed as an examination of the current state of our country and our myths of the "better life," only I had trouble getting my students to really investigate their own premises about technology and lifestyle.

So I hit on the idea of taking them out for along weekend hike in the Olympic mountains in the early spring when I knew the weather was going to be cold and rainy. All I told my class was, "We'll be out in the Olympics for two nights. It's going to rain. Bring your gear, food, and paper and pencils for taking notes. I'll meet you at the trail's head."

Now, I'm a hedonist in the wilderness. I own a good down sleeping bag and a fine one-man tent with a fly, and carry a very light pack stocked with trail food and the like. Naturally, my gear is pretty much a product of high technology.

Once we all got up to our campsite—at a place called the Flats—I set up my tent, dug a drain trench, stashed some firewood under the canopy for the morning, and helped organize the evening meal. We ate and hit the sack ... and then the rain came. Well, I was quite dry and comfortable in my tent, but a lot of my students weren't so well prepared: During the night, I heard voices crying, "My sleeping bag's all wet!" or "God, it's cold!" I simply rolled over and went back to sleep.

The next morning, I got up early and built a big fire. The shivering students soon gathered round, we scrounged together something to eat, and afterward I told them to get their note pads. Then I said, "OK, the bomb just dropped and we're all that's left. How much of our former technology do we try to reconstitute?" Well let me tell you, those cold, wet people who had eaten an inadequate breakfast looked at society's technology a good bit more closely than they had when sitting in a comfortable university classroom. Students who'd been saying things like "Oh sure, I could do without all this stuff" began to ask some basic questions, and to comprehend that technology isn't bad in and of itself. Everything depends on how we use it.

**PLOWBOY:** You're saying, then, that technopeasantry involves people's questioning their basic assumptions so they can make intelligent decisions about how to use technology?

**HERBERT:** Well, that's not all there is to it. There're other aspects to questioning how we use technology. For instance, most people today live in a "light switch" society where they have no actual connection to the tools they use. If the light goes off, they have to call the building superintendent to come repair it. Knowledge has become institutionalized into specialties, and individuals have continually less and less power over their lives.

We need to use technology differently so that people can understand their tools ... and so they can be put back in touch with the natural world. In fact, one of the things our society needs desperately is a way for people to touch the earth personally and gain the restorative strength that comes with weeding or shoveling, from really getting their hands dirty. We need ways that men and women can see the direct results of their efforts.

**PLOWBOY:** Would it be correct to say that technopeasantry can help develop a sense of self-worth in the individual?

**HERBERT:** Yes, but there's more to it, yet. We have to learn to recognize that we're always going to make some mistakes, and—knowing that—we shouldn't tie our careers and self-esteem to decisions that

could later prove to be the wrong ones. People must be able to say freely, "Hey, that turned out not to be such a good idea. I'd better not do that anymore."

**PLOWBOY:** The more you describe this concept, the more it encompasses! You're proposing that people learn to consciously judge what tools they use ... to employ technologies that they control and not those that control them ... and to evaluate and reevaluate all the ramifications of using each specific technology. Frankly, the thought that humans may someday be able to make so many carefully thought-out value decisions has the ring of an idealistic dream.

**HERBERT:** Well, it's not going to happen overnight ... unless we have a cataclysmic disaster-like some very traumatic natural phenomenon or an enormously destructive atomic war—which requires that we take such new directions in order to survive.

**PLOWBOY:** Assuming that we won't be forced into new behavior patterns by a catastrophe, how do you envision the change taking place?

**HERBERT:** As a result of social evolution. When individuals start making technopeasant choices—such as converting an inner city attic into a greenhouse—and demonstrating that doing so can be both personally rewarding and quite effective, more and more people will be drawn to such actions.

**PLOWBOY:** So you see the individual drive to achieve self-sufficiency as a catalyst of the movement toward what you call technopeasantry?

**HERBERT:** Hold on there! Yes, individuals will lead the way to a technopeasant society, but I've never said that people should strive for absolute self-reliance. I think relative freedom from dependency ought to be our goal. We all, of course, must be wary of systems—such as the whole ripcord welfare state—that systematize increasing dependence, but we must also remember a basic truth about human beings: We are interdependent. I myself am not attempting to live on a completely self-sufficient farm. I never have. Isolation is not part of my basic philosophy. The point is that we don't necessarily have to be dependent in some of the ways that we've chosen to be. I do, though, believe that a person's ties should be strongest to his or her local community, with looser bonds connecting him or her to larger communities.

In fact, there isn't a doubt in my mind that the average North American's life would improve if our society became more community based. If, say, cities like Seattle or little Port Townsend here developed symbiotic relationships with the surrounding farmland, so that—for example—the effluent of an urban community could become a tool for keeping the land around the city fertile. Such an interlocked region would be able to establish a self-sustaining cycle and not have to waste energy trucking fertilizers and food over long distances.

**PLOWBOY:** And do you see increased local autonomy as an inevitable part of our future?

**HERBERT:** Small areas are definitely going to have to become more independent. Look at energy, for instance. There's a growing shift to alternative fuels, and there's no way in the world the OPEC nations can stop it. Now the most attractive of the new power sources that I see on the horizon is hydrogen. Hydrogen burns cleanly—the by-product of its combustion is water—and has about a six-to-one energy-to-weight advantage compared to the best conventional jet fuel. In addition, we already have the technology to make hydrogen, in a hydride form, safer to handle than gasoline.

**PLOWBOY:** Where would we get the energy to produce hydrogen fuel?

**HERBERT:** We have wind, the tides, the temperature differential in the ocean ... there's an enormous amount of untapped energy. And the real importance of such diversified power resources will be the fact that communities will be able to make their own fuel.

Now you must recognize that any change which makes small areas more independent will have both good and bad aspects. After all, there is something to be said for the glue that holds us together as a society.

**PLOWBOY:** Wait a minute! You've spent a good bit of our time here damning big government and praising independence. Just what value do you see in large, centralized societies?

**HERBERT:** Remember that we are interdependent. So if you change the situation that has provided the glue of social interdependence, you must institute alternate adhesive forces to hold us together. Look at it this way: It's very possible that, within the next 15 years, a little community like Port Townsend could be in a position to threaten the federal government.

**PLOWBOY:** How could a small group back up such a threat? With atomics?

**HERBERT:** Pshaw! There are weapons much more dangerous than nuclear devices. Things like contagious diseases that can't be cured, or substances that can be slipped into food and water supply chains in order to sterilize large populations.

And the often-touted concept of world government could in no way handle such terrorism, because that particular dream suffers from what must be one of the few immovable laws of the universe: the basic truth that the more you try to control, the more there is that needs to be controlled.

**PLOWBOY:** So how can humanity deal with threats posed by small but powerful groups?

**HERBERT:** We're going to have to make very tough evaluations of how we instill morality into our young, and how we help people come to believe that all humans are similar creatures and that the world will be better off if everyone does try to live by something like the Golden Rule. And we'll probably discover—possibly only after suffering a certain amount of pain—that the only way to spread such values is, naturally, on the community and individual levels.

Ultimately, I think the individual will become increasingly important in this world. I think the collective society is on its way out. But, in relation to all my statements, you must remember that I'm talking about the kind of individual who has been raised to weigh the consequences of his or her actions, not simply for him- or herself, but for others as well. If we don't manage to produce such thinking moral citizens, we're likely going to go down the tube.

**PLOWBOY:** But you feel pretty sure humankind will be able to make the necessary changes?

**HERBERT:** I think they'll be forced on us. Oh, we'll make some mistakes. We'll probably have a number of fanatic leaders and such to deal with in the years to come. I don't see the future as being all sweetness and light, by any means. Learning from mistakes is a very slow process. It may take us 20,000 or 25,000 years to get to where, I feel, we have to go.

**PLOWBOY:** Still, you think humanity will survive ... and improve itself in the process.

**HERBERT:** Yes, and I also think that, in the far future, human beings will have scattered—in separate

societies—to numerous faraway planets. Don't forget, though, when you hear me say these things, that prediction is a form of false mythology.

Why, even the idea that there's such a thing as *the* future is a bunch of semantic nonsense because there'll always be changes and new events that no one can foresee.

**PLOWBOY:** So I should take all your projections of what will happen to humanity with a few grains of salt.

**HERBERT:** Of course.

**PLOWBOY:** You know, Mr. Herbert, it figures that you'd give me a prediction and then tell me not to believe it. Throughout this interview it's been all but impossible to pin you down to "neatly packaged" ideas. In fact, your concept of technopeasantry seems, in essence, to call for people to adopt a questioning state of mind that deliberately avoids set solutions. I can imagine that many men and women who read your books or hear your ideas would prefer to be given a clear and uncomplicated plan they could respond to.

**HERBERT:** Very likely, Monsieur Stone . But I don't believe in simple answers.

## A Few Frank Herbertisms

*The highest function of ecology is the understanding of consequences.*

**Dune**

*If you say, "I don't want that to happen," and all the while you are making it happen, which thing are we to believe? Do we believe the words or do we believe the body?*

**Soul Catcher**

*The one-eyed view of our universe says you must not look far afield for problems. Such problems may never arrive. Instead, tend to the wolf within your fences. The packs ranging outside may not even exist.*

**Children of Dune**

*... you know the story of Eve and the apple. Here's an interesting fact about that story: Eve was not the first to pluck and sample the apple. Adam was first and he learned by this to put the blame on Eve. My story tells you something about how our societies find a structural necessity for sub-groups.*

**God Emperor of Dune**

*"For what do you hunger, Lord?" Moneo ventured.*

*"For a humankind which can make truly long-term decisions. Do you know the key to that ability, Moneo?"*

*"You have said it many times, Lord. It is the ability to change your mind."*

*"Change, yes. And do you know what I mean by longterm?"*

*"For you, it must be measured in millennia, Lord."*

*"Moneo, even my thousands of years are but a puny blip against Infinity .... In the view of Infinity, any defined longterm is short-term."*

*"Then are there no rules at all, Lord?" Moneo's voice conveyed a faint hint of hysteria.*

*Leto smiled to ease the man's tensions. "Perhaps one.  
Short-term decisions tend to fail in the long-term."  
**God Emperor of Dune***