

TV OR GOD: WHO'S TELLING OUR STORY?

Some years ago, I took a fatherless 12-year-old suburban boy into the Angeles National Forest for his first backpacking trip. After 2 days of bushwhacking through manzanita scrub, cooling hot feet in crystal streams, and counting stars in the clear night sky, on the final day we rounded a mountain peak and were rewarded with a blazing orange sunset over the entire Los Angeles basin. "Wow!" the boy exclaimed, drawing in the magnificent view. "This is better than TV!"

With a jolt, I short-circuited back to age 7, straining tiptoed among adults packed on the sidewalk outside the appliance store window, gazing in awe at the six-inch picture screen inside. By the authority of my age and experience, therefore, I hereby seize the remote and push "Pause." You'll forgive an old man for interrupting the show. But as a father now, over a half century later into this Brave New World of media entertainment, I've become increasingly worried for my teenage son—not simply for its content, but for how the media intervenes god-like into our lives to proclaim identity, direction, and vitality to an abandoned generation.

The Apostle Paul never saw a single deodorant commercial (one blessing of ancient life), but he nailed the modern spirit when he reminded the Ephesians that, before Jesus made them "alive," they had wandered as "dead" and "followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air" (Ephes. 2:2). Just read "airwaves" instead, and you'll see what Paul's talking about here, namely, the unseen power in the natural world to seduce the children of God away from our true *super*-natural identity, direction, and vitality.

"Fast-Forward to Passivity," a recent *Los Angeles Times* editorial, offers the prophetic warning: "It would be unfortunate if the technologies we embrace for making our lives more efficient ended up freeing us to be merely passive viewers of virtual worlds rather than engaged participants in the real one." (Christine Rosen, 12/7/04, B13)

The battle of our time is for the authority to define this real world, and therefore, how we are to participate in it. Christians know it's not about being tough enough to face what you see and "call a spade a spade"—courageous as that may seem. Indeed, the real world is not even the one we face, no matter how squarely, with natural eyes. That world is not our home; we do not come from there, nor do we end up there. Rather, reality is defined by the God revealed in Jesus. For us, therefore, the real world is the *super*-natural theater in which God is busy accomplishing His purposes among us—which often appears as "foolishness" (I Cor. 1:18) to ordinary human eyes.

This battle to define ultimate reality is largely determined by where you focus your attention and grant authority. Thirty years ago, the national PTA president startled the nation by declaring that "TV has truly become a member of the family." Today, however, television and its concomitant DVD player, X-Box and such, has clearly become not simply one among other family members contending for an equal voice. Rather, the entire family gathers at its feet. It's not about whether we admit TV to the family or not, but about which of its mighty outpourings we will imbibe. Before the Media's throne, all human authority becomes second-hand if not virtual, belonging to whoever holds the Remote Scepter.

The media, in fact, has become the unchallenged Parent who presides over even Mom & Dad. As such, it replaces God in the family. This Parent commands the attention of the average American adult for an estimated three hours per day, and often more among unparented children. If people spent three hours every day of their lives in church, reading the Bible, or praying, they'd be called "religious fanatics."

Thirty years ago, even before the advent of video players, the *Detroit Free Press* newspaper offered the modern equivalent of \$2000 to any family who would disconnect its TV for a month. Would your family today dare take such an offer? In fact, nearly 80% of those contacted refused. The 20% who did stop watching TV for a month experienced “serious withdrawal symptoms,” from nervousness and headaches to more smoking and use of sleeping pills. “There really did seem to be an addiction to TV,” researchers concluded. “Some of those people almost literally went crazy. They didn’t know how to cope.”

In our increasingly alienated, fast-forward society, the extended family has disappeared, and busy schedules serve as a convenient excuse for avoiding friendships. We’re left craving for community, desperately seeking the shared experiences, values, and goals that foster it. We long for a common sense of belonging--in fact, a common Story which tells us “who we are, what we have done, and what we can do,” that is, “a Story which expresses ultimate reality—another term for a people’s religion.” (Wm. Fore, *TV & Religion: The Shaping of Faith, Values & Culture*, www.religion-online.org). These were the myths of ancient societies, and they were true insofar as they dealt with “power--who has it and who doesn’t; with values—what’s valuable and worthwhile and what’s not, and with morality—what’s right and permissible and what’s forbidden.”

From its beginnings, America’s Story was about God’s work in this world. Told in a context of humble Thanksgiving, it highlighted a Pilgrim people, who sought freedom from the powers of this world, suffered rejection and hardship, cried out for God’s saving hand, and prevailed. Yet even these pioneering Americans saw their Story as that of God’s ancient people, who left slavery in Egypt, endured the wilderness ordeal, and were delivered into the Promised Land to proclaim their God’s deliverance from the world’s bondage.

Today, the media is pre-empting our Story—and God’s. Told in a context of commercial consumption, it informs a people gathered faithfully around its prime-time banquet what is powerful, valuable, and permissible. On Sunday mornings, the national newspaper magazine commonly features a cover interview on life’s deepest issues—with a popular media celebrity preaching. Whether it’s teaching us that power is in a gun, that money and sex appeal are ultimately valuable, that it’s OK to belch like a Simpson child or engage in same-gender sexuality, the media is no passive mirror offered to reflect reality. Rather, its ad-jingle hymns and push-the-envelope catechisms reflect a power determined to shape and define reality for us. The sad effects in many viewers’ lives—from violence and addictions to passivity and sexually transmitted diseases--increasingly reveal the media Story as a seductive, two-dimensional ruse.

Media viewers want distraction. When you don’t know what it distracts you from, however, the media settles in as definition. We forget our true Story. We therefore don’t know Who we are, so we can’t know where we’re designed and empowered to go. We can’t see what God’s doing among us. Unable to affirm the ultimate reality of His world, we miss its compelling drama and rich vitality that actively engages every human being—both the glamorous and the disfigured, the rich and the poor, the celebrity and the scorned.

Jesus did not come to bring us to heaven, but to bring heaven to us—that is, to re-establish the Kingdom of God here “on earth as it is in heaven”-- to restore His authority and life-giving power to a lost and dying world. Those real enough to beg Him to do that in their own lives will have a Story to tell. Not just theirs, but God’s. As they tell it, the curtain between the natural world and the real world of His Spirit at work, rises. Not just in their lives, but in the world itself.

On tiptoes, Creation waits. God--Playwright, Prompter, and Director--leans forward. As the heavenly hosts applaud, we, the actors, take a deep breath—and step out into the real world.

Lights, camera—ACTION!

