
American Values versus Television Values

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Famous Minnesotans dominated American consciousness yesterday. John Luke Helder from Pine Island, Minnesota, received a lot of media attention because of his pipe-bombing spree. Meanwhile, a statue honoring Mary Tyler Moore—who isn't from here, never lived here, never worked here, never filmed her show here, and has no connection to Minnesota other than a few minutes of famous video of her throwing her hat—was unveiled in Minneapolis.

John Luke Helder is flagrantly psychotic and a proud product of our current university system. He has imbibed a great many of the politically correct

ideas that his professors would want him to imbibe, not necessarily including planting pipe bombs in rural mailboxes. His form of insanity is unique to his generation, which doesn't have a name yet. It's the generation after Generation Next, which is the generation after Generation X, which is the generation after the baby boomers, which is the generation after the so-called greatest generation.

The point is that there is such a thing as generational difference in the United States and in our history. But those who want to say that narcissistic, spoiled, drug-addled, violent, unhappy, depressed, and solipsistic kids like John

Luke Helder are unique to this generation aren't looking at themselves. The truth of the matter is that the differences between Generation X and the baby boomers and Generation Next and whatever you want to call the generation in their early twenties are very small. It's the same culture. But the differences between all of those generations and the famous greatest generation of World War II and the Depression are real and profound and statistically measurable in terms of divorce, out-of-wedlock births, drug use, and criminality. There is a yawning chasm, in behavioral terms, between people who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s and people who grew up in the 1930s and 1940s.

How do you explain this dramatic change? Lots of people say it was the 1960s, as if all of a sudden, our entire consciousness changed. The fact is that it is far more than that. That generation of the 1960s—the generation that turned on, tuned in, and dropped out—grew up on disgustingly wholesome entertainment: *Leave It to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, *Ozzie and Harriet*. When people referred to “Ozzie,” it was Ozzie Nelson, not Ozzy Osbourne. And what a falling-off was there, as the ghost says to Hamlet.

The generation that was raised on all of this positive, family values-oriented entertainment—my generation—ended up wrecking the culture. What happened? What changed? What's the crucial difference? The answer seems so obvious that I am constantly stunned that more people don't confront it.

Imagine that all of a sudden, people in a country are using a certain drug—every day, for twenty-nine hours and four minutes a week. As a result of this drug use, behavior changes. Families fall apart. Communities decay. Values collapse. And no one points to the drug in question and says maybe it's not such a great thing.

The key difference between “the greatest generation” and the generation of the 1960s and all subsequent generations is television. A factor that you need to consider if you're going to understand what has happened to this country in the past fifty years is that the typical American today devotes many of his waking hours to an activity that was unknown to my parents' generation when they were growing up.

My generation—I was born in 1948—and all subsequent generations have watched a great deal of television. How much? Solid statistical evidence shows that the average American, in the course of his or her life, will spend more time watching television than on any other waking activity. How can that be? We work forty or more hours a week, but at some point most people retire from work. Very few Americans ever retire from television. Most of us take vacations from work, but few Americans ever take vacations from television. We begin our TV lives some eighteen or twenty years before we begin our work lives. And so it adds up that in the course of a lifetime, you will spend more time watching television than all the hours in every job you will ever hold, combined.

How could it not have an impact?

Television—and not just bad television, but all television—is the obvious factor in changing America for the worse. Watching television has damaged this country and its core values in three ways: in encouraging negativity, pessimism, and a crisis-of-the-month mentality; in encouraging impatience and a short-term horizon; and in promoting a feelings-first philosophy and the primacy of emotion over all other factors in our national life.

Chicken Little on TV

That television encourages negativity, pessimism, depression, and fear is obvious. We don't have a news business in the United States; we have a bad-news business. The old saying in local news is that if it bleeds, it leads. Let's show some bodies! Some corpses! Some destruction! **USA Today**, a newspaper for which I write, did a study three years ago in which it found that over 70 percent of lead stories in local news broadcasts across the United States were about either violence or natural disasters: traffic accidents, fires, murders. There is a natural preference for alarming stories.

Chicken Little—anyone who predicts that the sky is falling, that the polar icecap is melting, that we're all choking—will always be a popular TV talk show guest. In February 1987, Oprah Winfrey reported on her top-rated national television show that researchers were saying that by 1990, one-fifth of all American heterosexuals would die of AIDS. The audience

gasped and looked around: Who will be dead in three years?

This is the research, Oprah said. Get used to it; it's too late to do anything about it. Oprah overstated the heterosexual AIDS deaths by 1990 by a factor of 40,000 to 1. She wasn't even close, but it was great TV.

Television is based on grabbing people's attention with some kind of horror. If a hard-working father who slaves away at two jobs because he wants to keep his five children in a Christian school comes home tonight and asks for God's blessings on each of his children, he won't make it into the news. But if the same father comes home and plugs his children with a revolver, particularly if it's a handgun, and they all die, it's national news.

A lot of nice people live in Minnesota, but who makes the national news? A fake Minnesotan named Mary Tyler Moore and a crazed bomber. That's television.

This applies not only to the news business, but also to the entertainment side. A clever television critic by the name of Leo Tolstoy began a book, **Anna Karenina**, by saying, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Dysfunction is dramatic. Television dramas and comedies show people in difficulty, which is why Americans commonly believe all kinds of lies that are promulgated readily by the mass media and by all kinds of experts who ought to know better.

Divorce, for example, is inherently dramatic in a way that a reliable marriage

is not, at least in theory. That is why television focuses on negative, risky social behavior. It's not a conspiracy among network people to undermine the institution of the family. It is an inherent preference for dysfunction and disaster and degradation built into the medium.

Changing Channels

The second area in which television undermines fundamental American values has to do with emphasizing a short-term rather than a long-term horizon.

By its very nature, television commands a short attention span. A *New York Times* analysis of changes in television during its first fifty years showed that, in 1950, on network prime time television, the average camera shot—of Lucy and Ethel, of Ralph Kramden—was held for ninety seconds. The average today is five seconds. On MTV, it's three seconds. On *Sesame Street*, it's four seconds.

The remote control—an evil invention—has mandated desperate competition. The last remaining bastion of male authority in this society is the remote control. *Channels* magazine, an insider's television magazine, did a study in which it showed that the average American male spends eighteen minutes on a channel before he switches; the only reason it's that long is sports. The average guy cannot watch one of these stupid shows to its conclusion. (Freud might have had some interesting commentary on the shape of a remote control—it could have been round or square rather than long and narrow, but never mind.)

The result of all of this is a disaster, not just for men, but for everybody. It's a disaster of a nation that needs to change channels constantly: in relationships, in where we live, in how we live, in how our children learn. Teachers will tell you that the main challenge facing preschool and elementary kids is their inability to sit still. Americans can't sit still. Why not? Because the whole idea of television is to make them impatient.

What's the purpose of commercials? To make you want stuff, to make you unhappy, to make you restless, to make you want whatever-it-is right now. There's an old saying, I think erroneously attributed to Churchill, that a politician looks to the next election and a statesman looks to the next generation. A TV viewer looks to the next commercial. That truly is a huge problem in the United States. The whole appeal of television is its immediacy and its fleeting nature. That is a disservice to the country because we forget where we came from and we never consider where we may be going.

Image and Emotion

The third area in which television assaults American values has to do with the primacy of image and emotion that is built into the visual nature of the medium.

I have lived in a TV-free household ever since I left my parents' home, where I was addicted to television. But I often have a difficult time sleeping when I'm away from home, so I turn on the tube. And there last night on

MSNBC was a Palestinian spokeswoman I'd never seen before. She was described as a legal adviser to the Palestine Authority, and she is devastatingly beautiful.

Don't let anyone tell you that terrorists don't understand television communication. On the one hand is the Israeli politician who is known universally in Israel as "the Bulldozer." Prime Minister Sharon is a disaster on television; he needs to eat a salad every once in a while. On the other hand is this bewitching woman—I don't think she is Palestinian, I have no idea what her ethnic provenance is—who speaks perfect, unaccented English and is stunningly pretty. That's all that matters on television. I'm impressed. When she talks about the tremendously peaceful Nobel Peace Prize winner Yasser Arafat, I know enough to be skeptical. But it doesn't matter, because television is all about how you feel and what you see.

A piece I wrote for the *Wall Street Journal* a couple of weeks ago has produced an angry response from its subject, Senator John Edwards, the very junior senator from North Carolina who is conducting a preposterous presidential campaign. People complained about George W. Bush having no record; John Edwards has been in the Senate less than three years. His presidential campaign is a joke, and he is now ranked by political insiders as, next to Al Gore, the most likely Democratic nominee. Why? Because he looks like a movie star. That's all that matters. Television is about emotion, not substance. It's about image,

not reality. A nation that spends all of its time watching television gets the politics it deserves, a politics of gesture and emptiness.

The Do-Something Disease

We are afflicted by what I call the do-something disease: it doesn't really matter whether we solve problems in this country; what matters is that we do something about them. We said this after the shootings at Columbine, a huge, overcovered national story that represents two of the bad things about television: the tendency to emphasize bad news, to have a crisis of the month and to say that everything is the worst it's ever been, everything is unprecedented, everything's disastrous. And Columbine also represents the primacy of emotion, the visceral need for a feel-good solution that amounts to nothing.

I testified before the House Judiciary Committee right after Columbine, and the committee was frustrated with me because I didn't call for any new government program in response to Columbine. It's absurd. Right after Columbine, President Clinton got this deeply meaningful agreement with theater owners that would solve the whole problem of violence in our schools: they would try to enforce the rating system and not allow little kids into R-rated movies. I don't think little kids should be allowed into R-rated movies, but the notion that, somehow, that kind of action is going to have a direct impact is absurd.

Conservatives fall into this as well. The do-something disease is mandated

by the emotionalism of television, where what matters is not what you do or who you are, but how you feel about it.

In a recent survey of educational performance, American seventh and eighth graders placed twenty-ninth out of thirty-one countries in mathematical achievement. We beat Algeria and Uganda. This is genuinely bad news, a much bigger disaster than Columbine or global warming. Our kids don't understand math. But here's the kicker: kids were asked, as part of this study, how they felt about their math knowledge, and our kids felt the best in the world. They felt the most confident, but they knew the least. What an achievement that is for the self-esteem movement! The self-esteem movement is based on television, on the premise that emotion matters, how you feel matters, not what you do or who you are. These are disasters for the United States.

Can-Do Optimists and Builders

The impact of television contravenes the values on which this country was based and has been built and has flourished. America is a country of optimism, of doers and builders. It wasn't built on a crisis-of-the-month mentality, hand wringing, and invocation of imminent disaster. My grandfather worked his whole life as a barrel maker in South Philadelphia after he came here from Ukraine in 1910. What animated him to work in a very difficult trade—a trade that ruined his hands with splinters—wasn't the hope of someday suing his employers. He was animated by the

certainty that his children and grandchildren would do better than he did. The fundamental core American value is the notion that individuals, when they are turned loose to build and to dream, can and will succeed.

One of the startling stories that the media regularly ignore is the spectacular, breathtaking strides in the African American community over the past hundred years. The progress has been steady and dramatic: the emergence of a huge black middle class, more and more college-educated and professional people. This is real progress, and it will continue if we embrace American ideals of optimism and self-reliance rather than constantly invoking crisis. One of the striking things in the rantings of John Luke Helder is how terrible things are in America. Really, things are not that bad, and if we believe that they are, we are undermining our own future.

A second key American value is looking at the long-term picture. This is a profoundly religious value: religious faith teaches us to look toward the next world, not the next commercial. A religious viewpoint and an American viewpoint teach us to honor and learn from the past, not to say, Well, we've never done things like this before, we've never had a post-family society before, but we'll try it because it will be exciting. The American viewpoint is to build on the past and look toward the long-term future. Hard work, patience, focus, and context are American values.

A third value is emphasizing action and building and actuality as opposed

to emotion. Nineteenth-century visitors to the United States—de Tocqueville, Dickens, Oscar Wilde—talked about practicality as a hallmark of this country. Americans are hard-headed, practical people, they're mechanics and builders, they're doers. That idea of doing rather than feeling, of conquering feelings, of doing your duty rather than following your heart, is the American ideal.

Turn Off Your TV!

The point about all of this, very simply, is that television as a medium, as a force, works against the values that this country needs and has always cherished. It's not simply a matter of getting a new chairman for the FCC or a new network president. It doesn't matter if people are spending their twenty-nine hours a week watching the History Channel—fat chance—it's still too much. The problem isn't too much bad language, violence, or graphic sexuality on television; the problem is too much television, period. It takes you out of life, it destroys conversation, it undermines families.

My challenge to you is to watch less television yourselves, and to get every member of your family, your affinity group, your community to watch less television. One very practical area where you can start: television news. Fox News spent two hours following an

idiot car chase in Los Angeles the other day. Forget about the Middle East, forget about the war on terror, forget about the stock market—we have a car chase! Doesn't that tell you something?

Many Americans spend more than an hour a day watching TV news. Don't do it. Turn it off. It's a great way to give yourself back some time. Instead of watching the TV news, you can read every newspaper worth reading in the country. Even better, get some exercise. Clean up the garage. Tend the yard. Cook dinner—and while you're doing it, listen to talk radio. The great gift of radio is that you can do other things while you're listening. Radio communicates via words and ideas, not images and emotions.

We need to restore a focus on optimism rather than despair, on the long-term rather than the short-term, and on practical judgments of what we do, not how we feel. You can make a difference by turning off those television sets.

Recover some of the household time that you sacrifice on the altar of television. The average American will devote thirteen uninterrupted years of life to TV. Do you want that on your gravestone? Your TV set doesn't need those years—your family does, your community does, your country does, and you do. ■