

Introduction

*Like cowboys making up songs around the campfire,
we hanker to create the culture we inhabit.*

Michael L. Umphrey¹

You may have heard about the groundwater pollution in the desert town of Hinkley, California, popularized by the movie *Erin Brockovich*. High levels of the carcinogen chromium 6 were dumped into the groundwater around Hinkley and absorbed into the aquifer that provided the town's drinking water. This contributed to the sickness or death of many adults and children who lived in the area. Doctors treated each ill person as if the cause of their declining health was *in* the person. But the real problem was a collective, environmental one. The real problem was *outside* of the people because the water essential to their survival and health was poisoned. For those who had already ingested too much of the carcinogen, there was often little that could be done. And, until the toxins were removed from their drinking water, there was no way to prevent others from becoming ill.

It's often said that "It takes a village to raise a child." To be effective parents, we have to rely upon resources outside of ourselves—social, cultural, and spiritual resources are necessary to support, strengthen, and renew us in our parenting. We may liken these collective resources to an aquifer. We each sink a personal "parenting well" into this collective "aquifer." From it we draw insights and impetus for the most important job on the planet. We naturally expect this aquifer to be free of toxins. But in the

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United States today, the aquifer that our parenting wells draw on is being poisoned. Good intentions and caring actions for our children (and for ourselves) are falling short. We can read all the latest parenting books, search for answers from experts on the Internet, and work hard supporting our kids, but ultimately, that's not enough. Nowadays, a significant external force affects our parenting. Until we understand and abate that force, we will lose our power to parent well.

That force is mass culture. It exists outside of ourselves, yet surrounds us and our kids. Mass produced entertainment, like TV, movies, music, radio, video games, computer software, along with mass produced toys, clothes, lunch boxes, and countless other accessories, form a larger culture that we inhabit but don't create. This culture, manufactured for a market, is actually a huge industry that combines advertising conglomerates, media entertainment multi-nationals, and global corporations. I call it an industry-generated culture. The messages of these huge companies are delivered to the masses through mass media. So I refer to our society as a media age. An industry-generated culture relies on the media for its existence. It couldn't exist without a mass delivery system. Screen technologies, particularly, form a historically unprecedented, massive transmission engine, enabling industry-generated messages to reach millions simultaneously.

Screen machines bring mixed blessings. Don't get me wrong. I love my computer and can't imagine how anyone wrote books without them. I can remember when librarians, instead of scanning a barcode with a computer, had to write a number inside your books before they were checked out. What do librarians do now with all their free time? Computers have brought us many gifts.

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So has our networked society. When an earthquake struck the Pacific Northwest, my oldest son called me from Los Angeles to ask if I was OK before the tremors had even stopped. He had heard about the earthquake on television—as it was happening. The other day a friend of mine had to hang up quickly from our phone call to take another one. Three minutes later I got a note of apology from her through e-mail. These examples of instantaneous communication made possible by modern-day screen machines demonstrate how screen technologies can draw us closer together as humans. And, of course, when the industry-generated culture works for us, we can parent well. For instance, when we globally gather around the electronic hearth to share the Olympics, a documentary by Ken Burns, or a newscast about an important world event, who cannot be immensely grateful for the potential of television to inform? Likewise, when we see an inspiring film, get alerted to new music, or listen to a radio conversation that causes us to think differently, who cannot be excited about all the wonderful richness of diversity and creativity available to us? Too bad that's not always the case.

The darker side of the industry-generated culture delivered through screen machines means that the messages they deliver are not always compatible with what we want as parents for our children. This type of culture is new to humans, so parenting in it is new as well. And it's tricky. Even if we turn off the televisions in our own homes and rigorously monitor video, movies, video games and computer usage, our kids still live and breathe in an industry-generated culture.

Most of society expects parents to fight industry-generated messages alone. Bill O'Reilly, host of the Fox News Channel's

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immensely popular *The O'Reilly Factor*, writes in his book *Who's Looking Out for You?*, "...effective parents will remove the TV's and computers from the kids' rooms. All media absorption should be done in public space. This is a dangerous world and the danger is now in the house. If the parent is really looking out for the kid, subversive material must be kept to an absolute minimum. Corrupting influences on children are everywhere, and parents must be full-time firefighters. . . The demons, the exploiters want your kids. You must look out for them. Fight hard." ² O'Reilly's parental advice makes sense. Many parents I work with don't put TVs or computers in their children's bedrooms. But we must question the underlying, unspoken assumption in his advice. Why do parents have to fight hard to impart their values to their kids? Should not the larger society support us? And shouldn't we expect to parent in a world without "corrupting influences everywhere?"

Ideally, we'd live in a larger culture that affirms the morals, values, attitudes, and behaviors we teach our children, a culture that affirms our parental voice. But we don't.

Parents find themselves in a "Catch-22." As a "self-regulating" industry, the industry-generated culture sets standards and affects wide-spread beliefs. It doesn't, however, bear responsibility for the effects of those standards and beliefs. The media industry will give plenty of lip service to ratings systems. Then it and its ally companies will intentionally market inappropriate content and a range of superfluous items to our youngsters. Their mantras, "It's up to parents to prevent their kids from seeing this stuff," and "Parents shouldn't buy it if they don't like it," are repeated incessantly. As parents strive to stay afloat and in control, they find themselves continually reacting to toxic messages, dealing with

nagging kids, and contradicting corporate hucksters. Kay Hymowitz, an affiliate scholar with the Institute for American Values, reminds us that “parents need to do something they’ve never been required to do before perhaps at any time in history: deliberately and consciously counter many of the dominant messages of their own culture.”³

If we had a relative living with us who frequently acted in anti-social ways, who said and did things that would damage our children, and who often contradicted what we told our children, and if we had to live with this relative because a mental institution was out of the question, how would we parent our kids in such an environment? It would demand far more from us than if we had a relative living with us that we could trust to help us out, someone who reliably reiterated our messages to our kids. Even though we may want to, we can’t confine the industry-generated culture to a mental hospital. We have to address it, no matter what it requires from us.

Since the inception of TV and the varied screen forms that followed, a majority of the viewing public chose and continues to choose mindless entertainment, vicarious violence, and exploitative sexuality. Why? Instead of becoming the “radio of the airwaves,” as initially intended, “inspiring and educating along with entertaining,” much of television today highlights the sensational and trivializes the sacred about the human condition. Why do we stand for this (actually we are sitting for it five hours every night) when there is so much work to be done to solve our social problems and relieve human suffering? What would happen if much of those 1,825 hours every year we spend watching TV were spent with our children and in our communities creatively addressing

the environmental crisis, teen suicide, crime, homelessness? Why are screen machines considered normal background noise seven hours and forty-four minutes each day for most American households when their content has little to do with the daily lives of the individuals watching, or not watching, as the case may be?

Screen technologies are peculiar inventions. They readily appeal to human beings' baser instincts. Sex and violence "sell" so well because as humans we are wired deep in our brains to be attracted to erotic visions and horrific images. Screen technologies can only "hook" people's thinking functions to the degree that the viewers actually want to think. Sensational content with the sole purpose to titillate can be habit forming, leading to lazy minds. Human beings, therefore, can become addicted to screen technologies in ways they can't to vacuum cleaners, toasters, or air conditioners. We must re-invent ourselves to be conscious in how we use screen technologies, or they will use us.

The industry-generated culture takes extreme advantage of our human vulnerability to screen technologies. One way corporations do this is through the intentional cross-advertising, targeted marketing, and product-placement in movies, TV programs, and video/computer games. Saturating children and youth with visual messages works. Thus, many personal interactions among the young are focused on market-driven distractions.

I agree with media critic Todd Gitlin when he states, "Youngsters' interest is what interests me. Interest is not only an intellectual but an emotional state. Popular culture absorbs a great deal of young people's attention and does so in a fashion that commands feeling."⁴ Listening to our children as they interact on school playgrounds, tuning in on teens' slumber party

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conversations, or eavesdropping on their telephone calls, we would hear many references to a culture manufactured by an industry. Why aren't first graders talking about the latest artwork they drew or the poetry they composed? Why are they talking about the cartoon they watched before school and the TV program they must watch after school? Why are many teens today preoccupied with how closely their bodies match the male and female models in the magazines they read more than with their own creative process? Rather than being attentive to their own inner lives, their own creative expressions, and to the people who love them, too much of our children's and teens' attention is focused by corporate agendas. The industry-generated culture captures our kids' interests, often replacing their own inner voices.

As humans we are influenced by personal interactions, by societal institutions, and by the over-arching culture. Personal influences are direct and colored by various degrees of intimacy. We talk with someone over a cup of coffee and exchange an idea, get an insight, or make a decision because of that particular connection. Personal relationships contribute powerfully, for good or ill, to our growth as human beings. Because we are directly engaged emotionally, we can notice fairly quickly if the other person has our best interests at heart. With personal contact it is usually easy to discern if the influence is dangerous, benign, or neutral. It may take some time to discern if it's worth the effort to walk away from a particular personal influence. For instance, when we "grow out of a friendship" with someone, it can be difficult to break the ties. In a more extreme example, a woman in a domestic violence situation may take years to recognize and leave that harmful influence. \int_{-7}^7 matter how unconscious we may

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become of the personal influences in our lives, however, they remain the ones we can control most directly.

Societal influences are those influences primarily coming from institutions and the standards, mores, and values communicated by institutions such as school, church, and community interactions. They are less obviously visible in our day-to-day routines than personal influences, but more directly observed than cultural influences. A minister, teacher, or federal court judge may interact personally in their professional role, yet at the same time interact from an impersonal distance, as they have the responsibility to uphold the standards and rules of the institutions they represent. These societal rules and standards are, in turn, shaped by and contained within the underlying cultural belief systems.

Cultural influences are more pervasive than personal or societal influences. In a sense, cultural influences are like the invisible air, always present, such a part of us that we seldom notice, yet powerful because they greatly impact how individuals think about themselves and each other. Cultural influences strongly impact the inner picture each of us holds of the world. This inner picture or mental model consists of deeply ingrained assumptions and generalizations that influence how we understand the world and our place in it. Mental models act as reference points for helping us develop a self-identity, both as individuals and as a group. With mental models we envision our future.

Henry Giroux, Professor of Secondary Education at Pennsylvania State University, observes that “culture is the primary terrain in which adults exercise power over children both ideologically and institutionally.”⁵ An industry-generated culture exercises enormous power over children. It also presents an ideology,

that is, a way of thinking about the world. But it's very different from a people-centered culture. In older societies the collective voice of the people developed the social rules of behavior. Extended family members taught the young, so children were directly influenced by real people. Parents could count on the community of the adults around them to uphold the values they taught to their kids. There was built-in reinforcement of the parental voice. Without encroachment from an industry-generated culture, parents and children were encircled by a societal structure in harmony with their needs. Obviously, we can't go back to such a society. We must find a way, however, for parents to be better supported in directly influencing their children within a highly complex industry-generated culture, owned by global enterprises.

We can no longer rely on the social structure around us to reiterate our messages to our kids. In fact, one of our biggest challenges as parents today is that too many societal influences are corporate clones. Many public schools, for instance, beam Channel One into the classrooms. In doing so, these schools implicitly add their authority to the commercial ads for junk food and violent video games the kids see each day. We also have to be suspect of organizations which purport to exist mainly to support parents. The National PTA, for example, "which for more than a century has promoted the health of children, now lists Coca-Cola Enterprises as a 'proud sponsor.'"⁶ The thinking behind this decision reflects the kind of thinking that in its outward appearance seems to help, but in actuality, thwarts parents. PTA President Shirley Igo told the *Washington Post*, "We really need [corporate sponsors]. Our budget is very thin and if we didn't have them, we wouldn't be able to develop new programs."⁷ The national PTA has now

appointed John Downs Jr., “the point man for Coke regarding the marketing of soft drinks. . .in schools,” to serve as an at-large member on the National PTA’s Board of Directors.⁸

It’s sad that the national PTA has “bought in” to a common misunderstanding: Organizations that serve the public can’t function apart from large corporations. The need for money is seen as a greater need than keeping a clear focus on the organizational purpose. What our children are starving for, and some literally dying for, are adult role models of strong purpose and vision. Adults who live their values serve as powerful motivators. But what adults do for money also motivates our kids.

Blurring the boundaries between a well-intentioned service organization and a giant corporation can be dangerous. An industry-generated culture is seeking what it can get *from* the people, rather than what it can give *to* the people. What it gives and how it gives is always based on the monetary profit it gains. Its insatiable desire sets us up as objects—things to be manipulated so that we will buy and consume. In a true culture created by people, not an industry with an agenda, the focus is on providing for the life of the community. In such a culture, people develop talents, learn skills, and make their communities better for the people who come after them. In their book *Where God Lives in the Human Brain*, Carol Rausch Albright and the late James Ashbrook define culture as “the system of information passed from one generation to the next, not by genetic inheritance but by teaching.”⁹ Today’s industry-generated culture actually interferes with our being able to teach and pass on our deepest values because it promotes a superficial life, with addictions and despair likely outcomes for many. It cannot

give us a life-promoting belief system to further the optimal development of future generations because it is not a culture of and for real people, but a culture of and for objects.

An industry-generated culture is, by its very nature, impersonal. It does not care. It does not know our kids and doesn't want to. It can't teach our kids patience or morality or help our children learn about themselves. Only we can do that. If the industry-generated mass culture replaces the basic function of culture in our lives, we are likely headed into increased family and societal dysfunction. We will lose control of what is known as the "symbolic constructs and rituals" that previously gave our lives meaning. For instance, parents and religions still preserve the symbolic meanings of many of our holidays such as Christmas and Hanukkah, while the industry-generated culture promotes rampant consumerism. Along with the materialism, comes a forgetting about the true symbolism of these holidays. We don't want to be the last generation to remember that meaning.

Walter Wink, a respected theologian and commentator on modern life, explains how in an industry-generated culture, we can fall prey to a slow erosion of our humanity. "The modern individual stripped of the values, rites, and customs that give a sense of belonging to traditional cultures, is the easy victim of the fads of style...fostered by the communication media. At once isolated and absorbed into the masses, people live under the illusion that the views and feelings they have acquired by attending to the media are their own. Overwhelmed by the giantism of corporations...individuals sense that the only escape from utter insignificance lies in identifying with these giants and idolizing them as the true bearers of their own human identity." ¹⁰

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If we don't generate our own culture, we relinquish our human identity to an industry-generated culture. If that happens, we lose vitality for our parenting and hope for our children.

Parenting Well in a Media Age turns parental attention away from the industry-generated culture and back where it belongs, on ourselves and on our children. If we want to move forward with a supportive personally-generated culture, we have two major parental obligations. First, we must work intentionally to develop a mature relationship with the industry-generated culture. That means understanding how to mitigate its negative effects. Second, we must work consciously to meet core human needs, not only for children, but for ourselves as well.

Creating a personally-generated culture, that culture of the people so many of us long for, will take effort, determination and rigorous allegiance to what we truly believe. It means parents express their inherent spiritual power and creativity in the world in exciting new ways.

My greatest hope is that *Parenting Well* helps you rediscover or renew your own courage and strength. I believe that we all must recognize and confront the challenges inherent in rearing children in this industry-generated culture. That takes a lot of self-trust, confidence, even boldness. The late Neil Postman, a renowned educator who understood the impact of an industry-generated culture on children, gave us this insight: "Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see."¹¹ Our "living messages" must live in a personally-generated culture. Together, we can create that culture for our children.

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