“Protecting Our Children From a Plague of Pessimism”
Michael Medved
Author, Hollywood vs. America

In this issue of Imprimis, film critic Michael Medved identifies the real victims of the modern culture wars: our children. His presentation was delivered during Hillsdale College’s Savano Institute for National Leadership seminar, “Educating for Virtue: The New ‘Values Revolution’” in Salt Lake City in April 1995.

Losing Hope

In recent years, our nation has been torn by fears that immigrants may be bad for America. In April of 1995, however, a major study at the University of Chicago suggested the profoundly depressing possibility that the reverse could be true: America just might be bad for immigrants.

Researchers surveyed more than 25,000 eighth graders and found that, in every ethnic group, children with immigrant parents perform significantly better in school than those whose parents were born here. “Their grades are superior; they score higher on standardized tests; and they aspire to college at a greater rate than their third generation peers.” Immigrant mothers and fathers generally “harbor optimism about the advantages of playing by the rules and the benefits that will occur through education.” They have a greater tendency to relieve their children of household chores to give them more study time, encourage older siblings to tutor younger children, and restrict television viewing.

The defining difference, the Chicago report concluded, is “the hopeful attitude of the immigrant parents.” Ironically, the longer immigrants live in this society and adjust to contemporary American norms, the more likely it is that they will lose this optimism— and their chances for success suffer accordingly.

Michael Medved is known to millions of Americans as the co-host of the popular weekly PBS television series, Sneak Previews, and as chief film critic for the New York Post. He has been a frequent guest on such programs as Nightline, Oprah, David Letterman, the Tonight Show and Good Morning America, and recently served as guest host of the Rush Limbaugh radio show. Mr. Medved is also co-founder, with Rabbi Daniel Lapin, of Pacific Jewish Center in Venice, California and a Hillsdale College Life Associate. He has written eight books, including the best-sellers What Really Happened to the Class of ’65?, The Shadow Presidents, and Hollywood vs. America. His new book, Saving Childhood: How to Protect Your Children from the National Assault on Innocence, will be published by HarperCollins in 1996.
A Plague of Pessimism

This alarming study only confirms what thoughtful parents already understand: that our children stand to lose a great deal from prolonged exposure to the dysfunctional elements in our current culture. They lose faith. They lose confidence. And they lose resistance to the most deadly epidemic menacing our youth today- which isn't AIDS, or gang violence, or teen pregnancy- but the plague of pessimism that has infected tens of millions of young Americans.

That plague's main symptom is a cry-baby culture, a national orgy of whining and self-pity. I routinely visit college campuses in every corner of the country, and with a few notable exceptions like Hillsdale College, I don’t see a lot of shining faces; or hopeful, enthusiastic students showing the promise of youth as expressed in the wonderful traditional university hymn, Guadensmus igtur, or “Let Us Rejoice for We Are Young.” Instead, student health clinics at Ivy League universities report that the service they provide most frequently to these privileged young people- aside from dealing with birth control, abortion, and sexually transmitted diseases- involves the treatment of clinical depression. In a national survey of young adults aged 16 to 29, conducted by MTV, the word selected as “least” describing their generation was “lucky,” while “angry” and “stressed out” appeared among the “best” descriptions of this age group. Kurt Cobain, the lead singer of the rock band Nirvana who killed himself at the height of his wealth and fame, is widely hailed as the authentic voice of “Generation X.”

Adolescent depression is nothing new of course. Some of us are even old enough to remember the 1950s when a small handful of “sensitive souls” dressed in black turtlenecks drank espresso coffee, strummed at guitars, and warbled grim folk songs about the end of the world. The excuse for every excess of dementia or delinquency was always the same: “We’re living under the shadow of the big bomb, so of course we’re going to act irrationally.”

But what’s the excuse now? The Cold War is over. The threat of nuclear destruction is dead- or at least vastly diminished. Miraculously enough, every country in Europe- even Albania- at the moment boasts a democratically elected government. But instead of the jubilation and atmosphere of celebration we might expect, we see instead a contagious cynicism and bleak visions of the future that reach far more young people than the relatively small percentage who were afflicted with the puerile self-pity of the ’50s and ’60s.

This depressed and nihilistic attitude toward life could be the biggest threat to America today- and the most pressing problem in American education. The University of Chicago study on the offspring of immigrants demonstrates the very essence of our current dilemma: Human beings will not learn, will not grow and will not develop good character traits if they believe that discipline and hard work are pointless, that life is meaningless and unfair, and that the outlook for the future is grim.

The Distorted World of the Media

To understand how to protect our children- and ourselves- from the current plague of pessimism, we must first understand the forces that contribute to this national addiction to despair. One of those factors is an immersion in mass media that engages most Americans for a significant portion of their waking hours. As a working film critic, I have spent more than a decade complaining about the levels of gratuitous brutality and loveless sex in American entertainment. The deepest problem with this material isn’t the possibility that children will imitate the behavior they see on screen- though we all know that this sort of imitation does occur: The more universal threat involves the underlying message of hopelessness conveyed by these ugly, consistently dysfunctional images in our society- a message that encourages both self-pity and fear.

Consider the vision of the future that movies and TV shows regularly convey: from Bladerunner to The Terminator to Waterworld, Hollywood suggests that the world that we pass on to generations to come will be inevitably and infinitely worse than the situation in which we live today. For many years, the movie business focused on nightmares about struggling survivors who somehow tried to carry on following the “inescapable” thermonuclear apocalypse; now that the threat of world war looks less credible, it is “environmental holocaust” that provides the fashionable basis for the message of doom. The great irony is that in reality, the all-but-stoppable spread of democracy, free market ideas, and liberating technology has spectacularly brightened the prospects for our children and grandchildren- those same children and grandchildren- who are so powerfully addicted to the media’s grim fantasies that they see paralyzed by pessimism.

Unfortunately, destructive media messages are by no means limited to those frightening fictional tales that pass today for entertainment; they also pervade the news business, which really ought to be called “the bad news business” for its emphasis on disaster.
and destructiveness. In the bizarre world of broadcast journalism, killing is always covered, while kindness is almost always ignored. The more alarming a news item may seem, the more attention it automatically receives.

If anything, the so-called “reality-based” programming and the ubiquitous TV talk shows are even worse. Every day of the week they dredge up some new perversion or human tragedy and triumphantly display it for all America to see and savor. Just the other day I heard them advertising a talk show on the subject, “Lesbians Who Beat Up Transvestites.” Now there’s a major social problem that deserves hard-hitting exposure by TV journalists! What would a Martian think if he were trying to draw conclusions about America based on regular watching of daytime talk shows? He’d probably conclude that the population of this country is nearly one-half transvestites, since cross-dressers seem to constitute the favorite life-form of today’s TV programmers.

These are serious issues because in a sense our own children—especially in their earliest years—are like little Martians. Unfortunately, they seem to spend less and less time with their chronically overworked parents, and to draw more and more of their information about the world of adults that awaits them beyond the home from the lurid images that flicker across their TV screens. The true power of the media is the ability to redefine reality, to alter our expectations about what constitutes normal life. In recent years, movies and TV have abused that power by advancing the notion that happiness and wholesomeness are outdated and impossible in today’s world.

It is essential to fight for more hopeful and decent material from the popular culture, and I have devoted much of my life to that struggle. But it is also important to move beyond questions about what Hollywood makes and focus new attention on what America takes; to concentrate on the demand side, rather than the supply side, of media issues. If we are waiting for the entertainment industry to change its fundamental values we may be in for a long wait, but when it comes to altering our own private consumption of the popular culture we need not delay another day.

To understand this crucial distinction, we can try a brief mental experiment about the impact of television. Just imagine that we all got our dearest wish and that trash TV became a thing of the past.

Pretend that every major network, every cable channel in the land, confined its broadcast schedule to uplifting, informative programming of the very highest quality. Could we then feel comfortable with the fact that our kids watched an average of 26 hours per week—which is the amount of time they spend today on television?

Of course, the answer is no. The major problem with the media today isn’t too much sex, or too much violence, or too much rude behavior; it is too much TV period. Sure, an improvement in the quality of TV could help the country, but we can meanwhile help ourselves by reducing the sheer quantity of what we watch. The schools should make that reduction a top priority for all our kids, helping to tame the tyranny too much TV.

One practical means to that end might be through the maintenance of a daily media diary. Every member of the family above the age of eight should own a notebook in which, before he turns in for the night, he writes out the title of all the TV shows, videos, or movies viewed that day. It is also important to jot down some brief evaluation of each of these entertainments—not any detailed review, necessarily, but even just a one-word verdict like “worthwhile” or “dumb.” This simple daily exercise, which won’t take more than two minutes of our time, will not only make us more thoughtful consumers of popular culture but will inevitably reduce the amount of TV we watch. Very few of us could record all the time we waste on media entertainment without some tinge of embarrassment—and without developing a determination to change.

This seemingly minor adjustment can in fact transform a home. Imagine that you cut down your TV watching just one-half hour a day—surely a sustainable sacrifice for any American. That one-half hour a day amounts to three-and-a-half extra hours a week to read a book, to listen to music, to exercise, to communicate with the people you love most, to work for causes you care about, or just to go out the door and enjoy this glorious world that God has given us.

“The major problem with the media today isn’t too much sex, or too much violence, or too much rude behavior; it is too much TV, period.”
The Poison of Ingratitude

A

ppreciating that world properly is the obvi-

ous antidote to the second principal cause of

the present plague of pessimism, and that

cause is ingratitude— the
gross, rank, unforgivable refu-
sal to acknowledge all the
countless blessings we enjoy.
Most of us understand from
personal experience what hap-
pens to us if we owe a debt of
thanks to an individual–a par-
ent, a spouse, a business col-
league– but for some reason we
are blocked from expressing
our appreciation. Thankful-
ness that is stifled can quickly
turn bitter and poisonous. It becomes an acid that
corrodes our very soul. At this moment in history,
ingratitude is the acid that is eating away at the soul
of America.

In so many ways, we who live in this remarkable
country are the envy of the world. We enjoy a daz-
zing range of opportunities that should make us
the envy, in fact, of all previous generations. That
doesn't mean that we should ignore the ferociously
complex problems that confront our country every
day. But dwelling on the negative, and neglecting
the debt of gratitude that is so obviously due, makes
it harder, not easier, to summon the will to find
solutions to our most serious dilemmas.

Ingratitude Toward Our Parents

"Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother" is not only
one of the Biblical ten commandments, but it is also
the most fundamental precept of all human decen-
cy and right behavior. At the moment, however, our
media, our government, and even our public
schools work together to undermine that impera-
tive. Instead of attempting to increase the respect
and gratitude children feel for their parents, today's
politically correct curricula convey the clear mes-
sage that the older generation is comprised of a
bunch of sexist, racist, homophbic, puritanical,
Eurocentric, materialistic and generally benighted
bozos. For instance, an official drug education
study guide for the state of New Jersey calls upon
fourth graders to wait until their parents are away
from home and then to make a careful inventory of
the family medicine cabinets, registering the pre-

cence of all addictive substances from alcohol to
tobacco to-- heaven help us-- aspirin. Meanwhile,
sex education and abuse prevention classes in many
public schools demand that children describe in
graphic detail when and how their parents touch
them and warn that displays of physical affection or
 corporeal punishment are suspect. Children are
taught, in other words, that parents are dangerous.
The school, not the home, is touted as a "safe
haven" where they are free to be themselves and will
learn all of life's important lessons.

This dismal situation requires nothing less than
a revolution in American edu-
cation. The first priority of
every school, of every curricu-
um, of every teacher should be
to bring children and parents
closer together, not drive them
further apart. With disillusion-

ed members of the younger
generation so palpably hungry
for heroes, our educators
should make it clear that they
need look no further than their
own homes—since so many
hard-working American parents clearly qualify as
everyday heroes. One of the reasons I dislike the
institution of Mother's Day and Father's Day is that
these holidays carry with them the implication that
we can pay our debt to our parents one day each
year and then forget about them the rest of the
time. Instead, every day should be Mother's Day,
every day should be Father's Day— particularly in
our schools.

Ingratitude Toward America

At the same time our educational system should
treat every day like the Fourth of July. Nothing
contributes so powerfully to the present plague of
pessimism than the despicable attempt—now firmly
 entrenched from elementary schools to elite uni-
versities— to smear the extraordinary and honor-
able history of the United States of America.

This form of ingratitude strikes me as especially
grotesque because, like those students in the
Chicago study, I am the child of an immigrant. My
mother came to America with her family in 1934 to
escape from Nazi Germany. On my father's side, it
was my grandfather who made the trip from a little
village in the Ukraine in 1910. He worked all his life
in a gritty South Philadelphia neighborhood where he
had lived for nearly 40 years. Did he feel bitter? Did
he suffer clinical depression? No, he felt grateful for
the opportunities America had given him, and he
lived long enough to see his son win a full scholar-
ship to attend the University of Pennsylvania and
earn a Ph.D. in physics.

"At this moment in history, ingratitude
is the acid that is
eating away at the
soul of America."
I mention this family story not because it is so extraordinary, but because it is so typical. When my grandfather died, my father went through his things and brought back something to show me that I’ll always remember. It was an American history book, written in Yiddish with the Hebrew characters, that my grandfather used to study for his citizenship exam; he always took pride in the fact that he finally managed to become a naturalized American in his late seventies. In any event, this book was filled with inspiring stories about our nation’s great achievements and noble heroes, and if anyone would bother to translate it back from Yiddish to English it would teach our children more effectively than any of the officially “enlightened” textbooks used in public schools today.

How could we ever repay this country—this island of sanity and goodwill in the vast, turbulent ocean of historic human misery—for all the gifts it has showered on us so freely, so open-handedly, with such noble and generous spirit?

There is a strange twist at the very beginning of our national experience in the fact that George Washington, the justly beloved Father of Our Country, never had children of his own. One can almost see the hand of Providence in this, because it means that to this very day, my children and your children are just as much Washington’s descendants as anyone else. In effect, we have all been adopted into a noble family line. That is why it is so essential that we celebrate not the multicultural contributions of our various ancestors in Eastern Europe or West Africa or Asia, but the achievements of our common forefathers, our national ancestors, who launched this country and changed man’s fate forever. With all my heart, I want my children to claim that heritage and to celebrate it as their precious birthright as Americans.

Perhaps the most basic explanation for the epidemic of ingratitude in this country is that too many of us, especially among our academic and media elites, refuse to recognize the great Benefactor who most richly deserves our thanks.

Even the observance of Thanksgiving has been distorted to suit the current and crazy idea that any acknowledgment of the Almighty in our schools represents some dire threat to our children. A number of elementary social studies go so far as to suggest that the purpose of the holiday is to remember the Pilgrims expressing their appreciation—to the Indians and not to God.

If our schools can’t teach our children who to thank and can’t explore the role of religious faith as the foundation for our civilization, then they contribute mightily to the sour and restless mood among the young.

**The Uses of Adversity**

In the battle to overcome that mood we can, at times, enlist unlikely allies. The motion picture Forrest Gump, last year’s Oscar winner and fourth biggest money-maker in Hollywood history, offers a powerful alternative to the penchant for pessimism.

It always surprised me that the many critics who sought to belittle the film regularly wrote it off as a simplistic, sappy “feel good” movie. This sort of characterization makes me wonder if they had even seen it, because the main character of this particular picture goes through a series of almost unimaginable tragedies. He is born with limited intelligence, and he feels it painfully. As a boy, he is forced to wear braces on his legs, and he is incessantly tormented by his peers. Eventually he goes to war and watches his best friend die in his arms, while his courageous commanding officer loses both legs on the battlefield. His adored mother also dies before his eyes, and the woman he has loved since childhood, after rejecting him time and time again for some 20 years, also dies within a few months of their marriage.

Does this really sound like a feel-good movie? If Forrest had been more in tune with the mentality of the 1990s and our crybaby culture, he would have been entitled to innumerable claims to self-pity and victimhood—as someone who was severely “mentally challenged,” the son of a single mother, an abandoned Vietnam vet, the husband of an AIDS patient, you name it.

But instead of whining, Forrest Gump held fast to his unshakable optimism and felt grateful for what favors he received. That’s the deeper meaning of the movie’s signature line, when Mama Gump tells Forrest: “Life is like a box of chocolates; you never
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“Whenever our vision may be clouded by the fog of pessimism, we should recall we have deeper reasons for confidence and joy. Rise up like a lion for the service of the Lord!”

In his impoverished village in the Ukraine, my grandfather fought to follow that demand, and in later years its theme helped him, under difficult circumstances, to continue dreaming his American dream. Rise up like a lion for the service of the Lord! One could hardly ask for a more forceful–or empowering–response to the attitude of gloomy impotence fostered by the mass media, or the chronic ingratitude that saps the confidence from our national culture. Let that be the message to America’s parents, to our children, to our schools, to all those who feel overwhelmed by problems, who feel their patience tried, their faith challenged, and their hope undermined. Whenever our vision may be clouded by the fog of pessimism, we should recall we have deeper reasons for confidence and joy. Rise up like a lion for the service of the Lord!”

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