THE MYTHS OF SUCCESS

By VALERIE LESNIAK

RECENTLY there has been a plethora of books, movies, articles, lectures and workshops focusing on the addictive character of our society. From Nancy Reagan's simple chant of 'Just say no' to the poignant human drama of the film, *Clean and sober,* our increased recognition of the effects of the addictive process offers new insights into the ideologies which sustain the commodity form of contemporary society.[1] In this article, I would like to draw upon the myths, meanings and underlying assumptions prevalent in an addictive commodity culture's image of success. I will focus primarily on the ways the myths abuse our human dignity through the addictive processes of dualism, denial and control. I would then like to consider a formative faith experience belonging to the Christian narrative, the experience of the God of creation summoning us now into life and existence fashioning us according to the image of Jesus. I would like to suggest that as we live deeply 'the dangerous way of Jesus', we will be challenged to express the depth of our personal and cultural anguish as revelatory of the hope God has for us. The Passionate God, gracing history with the way of Jesus, offers the most profound critique of the myths of success.

Addictive commodity culture

Attempting to describe an addictive commodity culture is somewhat like trying to conceive of the air we breathe. We know air is present, but it is impossible to grasp. Air is subtle and pervasive, so too the atmosphere created by an addictive commodity culture. We all inhale to some extent its particles. One way to gain insight into our own intoxication is to grapple with the underlying messages of our projected cultural myths. Cultural myths operate at the level of our imaginations. They provide a language which helps to interpret our reality. Myths furnish us with symbols whose meanings convey assumptions about our humanity and our destiny. At first sight, these meanings may seem too simple and stereotypic.

However, their power lies in their hidden influence upon our emotions and judgements. It is in attempting to discern the messages' hidden influence upon our emotions that recent research on the addictive process may prove helpful. Much has been written about addictions. I would like to draw attention to what Anne Wilson Schaef has called *the process of the addictive system.*[2] As Schaef writes,

> a process is the underlying, true meaning of a communication or the feeling in a communication. The process of a message is frequently even more powerful than the content of the message and is what people usually respond to when the two differ.[3]

The processes of dualism, denial and control operate significantly within an addictive commodity culture. Processes work at the level of human affectivity where our cultural myths deposit their hidden assumptions and enslave human desiring. As we explore the addictive commodity culture's myths about success, what Schaef contends about these particular processes will become evident.

Commodity culture's myths about success

In an age of mass communication and computerized information, advertising and the media are the primary heralds of our cultural myths. Through them, common images, meanings and hidden assumptions are disseminated quickly and continuously to the public.

Taken metaphorically, the quip 'you are what you eat', describes the motivating principle behind the commodity form of life. In a commodity culture, literally 'you are what you consume'. The more you possess and control, the happier and more successful you are imagined as being. The measuring stick for the worth and dignity of the human person is what and how much you have and consume. What one considers consumable in our western culture depends upon the ever-expanding commodification of human needs, desires and values. The market economy manipulates and capitalizes upon a human being's need for food, shelter, a livelihood, health care, mobility, social acceptance and recognition. Human desires for creativity, meaning, love, sexual expression and generativity, contributing to something greater than oneself and the longing for the Transcendent, become vulnerable to market strategies. Commodification of human needs and desires produces

an acceptable cultural context where people are 'things' and 'targets' for the advertising market. Since things can be used, abused, manipulated and destroyed, so too the human person is *exploited* (e.g., 'How to look rich even if you're not'), *violated,* ('How men like women to dress'), *controlled,* ('Because grey's not YOUR colour, use . . .') and *invalidated* ('You haven't lived until you try . . .').[4]

It is no wonder, then, that companies spend over 50 billion dollars a year on advertising alone. Advertising manipulates and fabricates endless new ways and means to fulfill what feels to be lacking or awry in human life. 'Things' hold out the promised expectation that by wearing so-and-so's label on your clothing you will be endowed with 'a unique self' brought to you, for a price, of course, nowhere else. These unremitting and supposedly self-identifying choices (e.g., 'For people who like to smoke because quality matters . . .') legitimate the endless demands of the consuming self which in turn validate the domination and exploitation of the earth's resources by the few.

Advertising gives us a good indicator of our working myths. Recently surveying the popular news magazine *Time,* the following 'story' about our culture emerged. The narrative line was nestled in advertising slogans in the first fifteen pages of the edition. 'There is a value to expediency and immediacy. Waiting is problematic. Progress is unlimited freedom, unlimited possibilities, unlimited growth and unlimited power. Rely on experts rather than on personal judgement and experience. Purchasing certain products satisfy one's sexual needs. It is important to be on top. Placing one's trust in rational knowledge and technical know-how gives one a sense of personal security. A company's commitment toward its consumer is redefined as human intimacy. Self-reliance and autonomy bring success. Winning is the name of the game. Be Number One. Style, mood or impression creates meaning. We control our own happiness. It is better to have than not to have. Life is a race and one must get ahead of the next person. New means better. One can trust the strong. Being thin and beautiful assures one of acceptance. If something is successful, it must be right. More is better than less. Being who I am is not enough. It is important to be perfect and give the right impression. Be in control. Be nice. Keep up appearances'.

Television, with its advertising, soap operas, sitcoms, sporting events and game shows, provides another way to gain access to

the messages within our societal myths. Playing upon the feelings of human inadequacies, low self-esteem and unworthiness, television offers 'quick fixes' for remedies. Turning on the television set, a person can live a vicarious existence. Through the portrayal of vivid and intense emotions acted out before them, the viewer never has to risk anything personally. From a car commercial that states 'we build excitement' to the disparate and conniving relationships of *Dallas* or the blatant, justifiable violence of 'the good guy' in *Wiseguy,* television sustains a version of 'the good life' fuelled by our ambivalent feelings toward personal ambition and consumerism.[5] Viewers are tantalized by what they see into a pseudo-form of living.[6] The by-product is not sensory enhancement and aesthetic development but what Robert Jay Lifton has called psychic numbing[7]—a tuning off. An intolerant incoherence, imaged through the rhythm of television programming and commercial breaks, educates the viewer into escapism, passive acceptance and sporadic and momentary living. A person need not cherish a sense of her or his own narrative history and intrapsychic and interpersonal relationships. One can live from one television episode to the next. Access to one's own human reactions and experiences are transitory at best. The television set dominates most 'living rooms', babysits our children and is an expedient way to spend an evening with another human being without any meaningful discourse ever occurring. Human imagination becomes fixated on what is tangible.

What myths about success emerge from the myth conveyors of advertising and television? I would like to suggest three: (1) 'You can do anything you want to if you just set your mind to it, and go to work'. (2) 'You are successful to the extent you keep acquiring more money, status or power'. (3) 'Success is coming out ahead of others (climbing up the ladder) by one's own efforts'.

Success by definition is some form of public recognition given for the attainment of some concrete achievement. It is perceived above, however, as the outcome or normal consequence of one's own effort in a market economy. The healthy, human need for striving and reaching a goal is overshadowed in a commodity culture by an emphasis upon acquiring power, money and status as *the* form of public recognition. Working hard, moving up the ladder and becoming a competent professional are the sought-after achievements in the market economy. The expected consequences of such successes are the personal accumulation of possessions and

the attainment of a 'comfortable' level of living. Success viewed as a commodity, and a scarce commodity, creates and maintains a competitive, discriminating and myopic worldview. One can reject and easily compartmentalize any reality one wants within this context. Insurance policies, retirement plans, even pre-arranged burial packages insulate persons from the ups and downs of life. So one appears in life well-groomed and well-programmed, everything under control. The process of control manages to keep our worldview disenfranchised from the wider realities of poverty, hunger, violence and injustice, realities perpetuated by our economic achievements. *Forbes* magazine, in reporting the highest salaried entertainers in our society, remarked, 'this year's list knows no racial boundaries, noting that 25% of those on the list are black. If entertainment statistics were valid evidence of racial bias, one would have to conclude that blacks are privileged in our society.'[8] The commodity culture thus re-shapes a worldview sustaining the myth that anyone can 'make it' if one tries hard enough. Reality becomes a projection of what one wants to see. It has successfully re-imaged the world as a global department store accessible to those with the appropriate credit cards. It is not as profitable, however, to recognize the world as ecologically and socially interdependent, yet diverse, human cultures.

Success, thus, becomes a private and an individual affair and its only limits are one's own ambition and drive. So we are not surprised nor dismayed at 'the absent workaholic father' or the rise in rewards of 'Type A' behaviour in the work place, in academic settings and in the Church. The emergence of the 'supermom' who juggles family, career and a social life is not only a historic achievement of the women's liberation movement, but has become an economic necessity in order to sustain the semblance of a middle-class lifestyle. A middle-class lifestyle has become sanctimonious ground for contemporary society. The fear of failure and of not being accepted motivate many in becoming 'Xerox' copies of one another. Social critic and historian Stuart Ewen remarks,

> Within the so-called yuppie (young urban professional) culture of the 1980s, we find the ultimate expression of such a 'middle class' ideal, as well as its inherent anxieties. Amid a declining standard of living for many, these young professionals—many of whom are employed by the new 'information industries'—scramble

> to surround themselves with the ever-changing 'latest' in designer clothing, consumer electronics and other commodified symbols of the *good life.* As they frenetically pursue this semiotic world of objects, they perform a role written by Ira Steward, more than one hundred years before. Life is a tightening snare of credit and debt; all connection to society, or to social responsibility, is forsworn in favor of individual acquisition and display; stress and stress-induced conditions are endemic; *loneliness* and *emptiness* are common in their accounts of everyday life. In their ongoing presentation of self, it is essential that one's inner self, one's inner feelings, remain masked.[9]

The relegation of true feelings to the realm of the repressed or posited at best to the gender-role stereotype of women effectively deprives the public sphere of the spectrum of the so-called 'feminine' responses. The more 'masculine' values of strategic planning, logic and efficiency dominate the public sphere. The private world provides the repository for repressed human feelings. Values like the importance of personal, not just functional, relationships for life-fulfillment, work valued for its own sake or the norm of helpfulness to others have their place only in the private sphere. Although women in increasing numbers have entered the work place, 'it is simpler to dress for success than to change the definition of success'.[10] For who knows what would happen in our quest for economic success if the human longings for compassion and justice were given as equal a voice as profit and efficiency? Thus, the process of dualism, (e.g., private/public; feminine/masculine; right/wrong; we/they), separates us from the possibility of human wholeness and subtly undervalues and invalidates the designated 'feminine'/weaker side to any polarity. Dualisms perpetuate a dominating-subjugating life perspective.

Success's sense of happiness is based upon merit and having earned peace of mind through one's own efforts. Self-isolation and covetousness come as a result of Pelagian efforts. Human feelings become equated with exterior goods and exterior goods become substitutes for a human life. Lewis H. Lapham in *Money and class in America: notes and observation on our civil religion,* comments on a series of advertisements published in *Architectural Digest* entitled 'Affluence, America'. The journal described the common characteristics of the suburb, which reflected its subscribers level of achievement: average household income of $114,000 per annum; 8 out of 10 buy fine arts and antiques; an average home entertains

65 guests per month; 5 out of 10 households own two or more cars; 1 out of 5 is worth at least $1 million; an average house is worth $250,000; 3 out of 4 go abroad every 3 years and 2 out of 5 buy wine by the case. This is a portrait of success, of having 'made it'. However, Lapham adds in a telling footnote,

> The advertisement quite properly omits any reference to the less flattering aspects of Affluence, America. The apologist doesn't seek out corollary statistics—for example, 2 of 5 are in the hands of psychoanalysts; 1 of 2 divorced; 8 of 10 estranged from their children; 3 of 4 complain of chronic depression; 4 of 8 addicted to cocaine; 1 of 5 under indictment for theft or fraud.[11]

Cosmetic living covers up the high cost of success in the commodity culture. Alienation from self, from others, from society and the world community contributes to the denial of the fundamental human reality and need for connectedness. One lives in a self-alienated vacuum which feeds doubts about one's own integrity and wholeness. One places sole trust in one's own resources for survival. The survivor's virtues of self-reliance and individualism convert experiences of human weakness, need and vulnerability into problems which, if they cannot be immediately solved, can be pacified for a time with some new commodity.

The myths about success tell us that we are perfect, self-sufficient and happy as long as we work hard enough. The hidden messages, by contrast, tell us that we are replaceable objects and quantifiable; our work is price-valued and its purpose resides in expanding our power to acquire things; and our happiness lies in the abstract magic of money. From athletes, politicians, movie stars, yuppies to television evangelists, our images of success reflect the ideological presuppositions of an addictive commodity culture: 'more is better, nobody ever has enough and people are things'. Individualism, competition, accumulation and domination, the acceptable modes of behaviour, express the personality structures of the commodified self. Influencing our emotions and judgements, the addictive processes of dualism, denial and control involve us in life-denying perspectives. The most tragic outcome is the growing mistrust of what it means to be truly human. Human needs and desires readily commodified are subject to the abuse of the competitive free market. Human feelings become monetized and thus easily controlled by the status quo. The more we submit to the assumptions

of our cultural myths concerning success the more suspicious we grow about our desires. As we abandon ourselves to 'quick fixes', we distance ourselves from our deeper life-affirming hopes. The myths, taken to their most extreme conclusion, absolutize the self as a commodified self, addictively attached to idolatrous substitutes. It is a state of nonliving and hopelessness.

The 'dangerous memory and way of Jesus'

For people of faith, these are not the words we hear spoken about our humanity and destiny. Our biblical faith affirms that we are made into the image of God. We come from and are destined for God. God is a God of life, deeply involved in our history and in our humanity. Our faith tradition proclaims a 'dangerous memory', the memory of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ and a 'dangerous way', the way of following Christ. We believe that God so loved the world that God sent God's Beloved into the world. In Jesus, God's passionate desire of life for us was made visible. We are not objects, quantifiable and replaceable. We are subjects of God's desire and grace. We are precious in God's eyes, 'intended to become true images of Christ' (Rom 8,29). In Jesus, we see the truth of our humanity. Jesus, the humble and poor one, welcomed the sinner, the sick, the poor, the lost and the seeking. Jesus was led by the Spirit of Truth into places where he was vulnerable to false powers, human weaknesses and limitations. He embraced the fullness of humanity by faithfully choosing to live his life freely, accepting no other power than God's creative love. Jesus revealed the miracle of God's abundant care as people accepted the truth of their human desires and weaknesses in faith. Jesus's healing interaction with people revealed a non-dominating and non-addictive exchange of affectivity. Through these encounters, mercy, justice, compassion and new life came to dwell in people's lives. For those who refused, saw no profit in such a stance or projected their own will to dominate, Jesus was an enigma, a subversive and a naive failure. In the Passion, Jesus accepted the ultimate forms of human weakness, abuse and limitation—betrayal, failure, abandonment and death. Jesus accepted these realities in obedient response to God's great love. They were the result of how Jesus chose to live his life as God's Beloved. In Jesus's dying, his cry of anguish came from the depth of his being, silencing and stopping the world for a brief moment. But that moment of complete and utter

surrender was enough. Through Jesus's passionate living and dying, God revealed Jesus's resurrection, releasing a startling new image of God's desire for our humanity and destiny.

The deep apprehension of our creaturehood, of being made at this very moment in the image of God and Christ, is a gift of faith critically needed today. This gift of faith is a profound reversal of the image of the human person portrayed in the addictive commodity culture. The deeper we live within this mystery of our creation the more profoundly we will experience the anguish of our personal and cultural history. We will know the depth to which we have abused God's good creation and the gift of our good created selves. In humbly accepting the truth about our living, the idolatrous satisfactions of our desires will become vulnerable to God's liberating power. Faith invites us to voice the painful alienations we experience as our witness to hope in God. With Jesus, we need to stand in faith and love where we feel powerless to do anything and call upon the living God. This stance is not one of passive inevitability but of releasement. How often have we submitted to God our uneasiness about our cultural myths and their assumptions? How aware are we of the failures, betrayals, abandonments and deaths initiated by the dominating processes of dualism, denial and control? Have we felt outrage in public and in private prayer over the growing disparity between the rich and the poor? Have we felt deep sorrow over a national and world economy so utterly dependent upon the manufacturing of military weapons for the continuance of 'economic progress'? What sense of grief invades our hearts piercing open our experience of nonliving and hopelessness? The uneasiness is not just a private concern but a matter of faith and hope. God acts in history through communities and people willing to embark on such uneasy journeys of faith. We are invited to live our history as passionately as Christ and not to be merely victims of the myths of success. I would like to conclude with a few excerpts from a poem, 'Conversation in Moscow' by an American poet, Denise Levertov, who captures well the power and hope of living in the 'dangerous way of Christ'.

> . . . 'Human doubts, human longings,' he utters the words
> solemnly,—'human longing
> for ineffable justice and mercy:
> in these lies purity
> and the worth of men's lives—

new as a birch bud in spring.'
. . . And then he says,
'In the end
we must follow Christ.' 'Is he joking?'—
I turn to my woman friend again, confused.
'No, No,' the historian says, understanding my question.
'I am not joking. I'm speaking
of spirit. Not dogma but spirit. The Way.
. . .we mustn't, any of us, lose touch with the source,
pretend it's not there, cover over
the mineshaft of passion
despair somberly tolls its bell
from the depths of,
and wildest joy
sings out of too,
flashing
the scales of its laughing, improbable music,
grief and delight entwined in the dark down there.'[12]

NOTES

[1] I am dependent on John Francis Kavanaugh's work, *Following Christ in a consumer society* (Maryknoll, New York, 1981) for providing many of the philosophical underpinnings of this article.

[2] See Schaef, Anne Wilson: *When society becomes an addict* (San Francisco, 1987) and Schaef, Anne Wilson and Fassel, Diane: *The addictive organization* (San Francisco, 1988).

[3] See Schaef and Fassel: *The addictive organization,* pp 68–76.

[4] All the examples are taken from *Woman's Day Magazine,* October 27, 1987.

[5] Bellah, Robert *et. al.: Habits of the heart: individualism and commitment in American life* (Berkeley, 1985), pp 277–281.

[6] I am grateful to my colleagues in the Christian Spirituality Doctoral Program at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California for participating in a discussion on September 15, 1988 on these topics.

[7] Lifton, Robert Jay: *The broken connection* (New York, 1979).

[7] Quoted in the *San Francisco Chronicle,* Monday September 19, 1988 sec A, p 27.

[9] Ewen, Stuart: *All consuming images: the politics of style in contemporary culture* (New York, 1988), pp 70–71.

[10] See Markus, Maria: 'Women, success and civil society: submission to, or subversion of, the achievement principle' in Benhabib, Seyla and Cornell, Drucilla, eds.: *Feminism as critique: on the politics of gender* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1987), pp 96–109.

[11] Lapham, Lewis H.: *Money and class in America: notes and observation on our civil religion* (New York, 1988) p 141.

[12] Levertov, Denise: 'Conversation in Moscow' in *The freeing of the dust* (New York: 1975), pp 89–91.