

# THE PROPHETS OF NARCISSISM

By WILLIAM J. O'MALLEY

**B**EFORE THEIR FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL, children have logged more time in front of the mesmerizing Electronic Nanny than with all the teachers they will ever have. Unarguably, television is the most potent educational tool ever created. It is, in fact, the Superego of society, its controlling agent within our minds—commands unquestionably ‘taped’ before we were able even to think, much less critique them. The media tell us the meaning of ‘success’ and ‘value’, which choices assure ‘fulfilment’. Like any propaganda, the media are morally neutral. What shifts them into the moral realm is their message, and their message is pervasively corrosive to the human spirit. No matter the form (programming, commercials, news, music, even sports), the rock-bottom ‘value’ of the media huckster is narcissism: self-absorption.

The best brainwashing you do not realize you are getting, and twenty-seven years with secondary and university students convinces me that our society has done some masterful brainwashing. ‘Who listens to commercials?’ Well, if commercials are so ineffectual, why do otherwise canny business folk waste megabillions on them? Why do you find your mental tapes exhorting you to have ‘a break today at McDonalds’s’—while you brush your teeth. ‘There’s nothing wrong with rock lyrics; we listen for the music.’ Then how is it that, if I give you one line, you can give me the next five? Surely *something* has given our sexual values a 180-degree spin from 40 years ago when any prurient youth wanting to find what a n-a-k-e-d woman looked like had to hope the *National Geographic* took another instructive jaunt to darkest Africa that month. In those simpler days, in the minds of most, thrift and chastity were virtues; now greed and lust are.

Along with the *Playboy* mystique, television seeped into our lives so gradually—so totally—we never felt the ground eroding under our feet. Only those of us over forty remember the world in those ‘Waltons’ days, and even we tend to forget. Most of the things in our homes today were not invented when we were young. No TV,

no plastic, no microwaves, no washer-driers. Nor were assassinations commonplace, or mega-corporations, or universal world debt. All are now vividly present morning, noon and night in our living rooms. As the media shrank our world to a global village, we shrank, too, feeling helpless to do anything about anything. We are 'better off' than in those flinty, Puritan days of depression, but one hesitates to say we are not depressed.

The media's radical effect on our spirits has been to make the objectively trivial important (boys' games played by men, late-night pronouncements of starlets, sex lives of tycoons) and the objectively important trivial (love, sex, death). Before children reach primary school, they witness more carnage and seduction than a lifelong veteran in the army of Genghis Khan. If Tarkington wrote *Seventeen* today, he would have to call it *Eight*. The tough, pseudo-sophisticated cynicism in our young today would shock even the hip *Weltschmerz* of an expert like Holden Caulfield in *The catcher in the rye*—which was written about my generation.

Gradually and unnoticeably, the media corrode the human spirit. My spirit is my soul—my self, my character, my who-I-am. It is that potential within me that responds to the numinous and sacred in nature, art, God, the beloved. It is where the nebulous, unquantifiable aspects of myself reside: honour, awe, loyalty, remorse, patriotism, faith, hope, love. And I find all of those realities painfully lacking in the students I teach. Catholic students.

The human soul is only *potential*. It is always there, but it need not necessarily be actualized. Of all natures on earth, only human nature is an invitation, not a command. No rock refuses to be inert; no daisy refuses nourishment; no lion refuses to act leonine. But the daily papers are rife with irrefutable evidence human beings refuse to act humanly. We are born only *humanizable*. A human baby is to an animal cub as an acorn is to a marble. Plant the marble and the acorn, and the marble will just lie there. But the acorn has the potential to be something greater than what it started as—if it is nurtured. Just so, a human child has the potential to be as great-souled as Mother Teresa—or as nearly soulless and animal as rapists and extermination-camp guards. And the media have had far more powerful nurturance of our young than their parents or schooling. If the TV says white, and a teacher says black, it is white.

Dis-spiritedness in our young—and not-so-young—occurs simply because access to the spirit comes only through vulnerability. Very

little can make our young say 'Wow!' today, because they are jaded by extravaganzas, while awe confesses humility before a stimulus which is undeniably greater than oneself. You cannot 'sell' faith, honour, patriotism and the rest to sceptics with their guard up all the time. All you can sell them is a more explosive rock concert, a better grade of grass, a kinkier sex movie. We have forgotten the taste of bread.

In 40 years, the media have turned our world—our values—our souls—upside down.

### *Programming*

Kids knew the bad guys in old westerns by the colour of their hats. But the bad guys on 'Dallas' and 'Falconcrest' are role models of 'success': competitive individualists who get what they want by exploitation, intimidation and betrayal. Precisely the models the tragic Willy Loman held up to his sons in *Death of a salesman*: success comes solely from personal magnetism and wits, not from learning, or hard work, or thrift. Personality pre-empts character.

Worse, even the good guys are illusions. Does any living doctor desert her other patients to roam in search of a wayward patient? Any lawyer like Perry Mason who has only one client, to whom he devotes his entire staff, and who has lost a case only once? Any real father as longsuffering as Bill Cosby? And how do real-life doctors, lawyers, and fathers fare by contrast in the eyes of our children?

The media lead our future citizens to believe that the most complex problems are capable of solution within an hour. In police shows, there is no slogging through files and ringing doorbells—the bulk of an officer's work. No show dares focus on a doctor in an eight-hour operation or a lawyer in the tedious process of selecting a jury. Our attention spans are too narrow and impatient to deal with reality.

Even the sets deliver illusory messages. Characters in blue-collar sit-coms live in homes owing more to an over-budgeted set designer than to the parents' paychecks. Children of actual blue-collar parents watch those shows. Small wonder so many steal to rectify the inequity.

The easement regarding sexual situations in the media also came so gradually we hardly noticed. In forty years we moved from an initial 'Condemned' rating for 'Gone with the wind' (because Rhett carried his own wife upstairs to their bedroom) to scenes all

day long which are completely explicit but assume that, if you really like one another, sex is as natural for humans as for hamsters. Truly admirable people like Hawkeye Pierce on 'M\*A\*S\*H\*' enter the Temple of Venus without benefit of marriage licence. And our young assimilated that 'value' before they learned to tie their own shoes or assemble their own toys.

I gave a questionnaire to 178 boys listing 30 actions, asking whether they believed each action was 'mortal', 'serious', 'venial', or 'not a sin'. To 'sex with a willing stranger', 68% said it was at most venial or not a sin at all; to 'sex with your steady', 92% said the same. Beyond argument (although they *do* argue!), sex is not 'serious' to them. Where did they get that? Not from their parents or their teachers. From Big Brother.

But who *is* Big Brother? Like trying to pin responsibility for atrocities in war, finding the agents perpetrating this soul-deterioration is impossible; they are hydra-headed. What is more, it is self-serving to lay off all the blame on the media manipulators. If charity, joy, peace, patience, etc., sold goods, they would give us those. If we did not buy, they would not sell.

The talk shows peppering the daily programming demonstrate the trivial made important. Would anyone sane sit still to soak up the wit and wisdom of women whose sole talents project from their ribs or of men who carry an inflated pig bladder through eleven others down a striped lawn? The soul-message is: nothing succeeds like the appearance of success. Notoriety outweighs genuine achievement. 'Success' has nothing to do with substance, only—as for Willy Loman—with *image*.

Studies show that, in most families, children control the dial until nine each evening. Thus, programmers appeal to the lowest common denominator: the ten-year-old mind. No problem with a sophomoric, Monty Python pratfall every once in a while, but a whole week of them has some effect on the hypnotized victims. We click around for something better and settle on the least deadly. It will get better. And it does not. Little chance Mom will say, 'Let's paint a picture. Or make homemade bread. Or even play Monopoly together.' Get real, Mom.

Even in honours English classes, many students have never read a book without a quiz pointed at their heads. When the imagination is usurped by professionals, it atrophies, and the humanizable soul atrophies with it.

*Commercials*

Every ten minutes on TV, every three minutes on radio, on every page of every magazine and newspaper, on the sides and back of every bus, our young encounter Big Brother. Beneath whatever spiel at any given time, there is always the same incessant commandment: 'The more things you have, the happier you'll be. We don't want to be like poor children. They don't have Barbie Dolls and chocolate cake. Let's talk to Mommy and Daddy and see if they really love us. The more things you have . . .' Thomas More and Joan of Arc could not resist that brainwashing—hundreds of times every day, for a lifetime.

The tube tells our young what is truly important: image, appearance, surfaces. That will make you a success: your skin, clothes, toilet bowl, car, lawn mower. As Auden put it, '[He] had everything necessary to the Modern Man, A phonograph, a radio, a car, and a frigidaire'. What will make you happy? 'Things!' Things build your image, and your image is what you are. As a result, we are always sniffing, peering, probing; there might be shortcomings of which the media have not yet reminded us. We wash with deodorant soap, apply a deodorant, and then slap on some cologne. Just in case.

What is more, nearly every product comes with an ironclad guarantee. If you are unsatisfied, merely bring back the item, and whatever you have expended will be cheerfully refunded. But the truly important choices in life have no guarantee: what university, what career, what spouse? Life itself has no warranty or refund. Yet the young face life with an optimism to baffle Pollyanna. The Yellow Brick Road stretches inexorably on to Oz. No need to fret. Or study. It is all taken care of.

Advertising creates needs that for 300,000 years we never knew we had. Who ever thought it was such a task to open a can by hand? How did the staff of 'Upstairs, downstairs' clean that mausoleum without a tank vacuum and a forest of brushes? What did pets eat before gourmet canned foods? What did people do while walking before Walkman? Does anybody actually *need* Nintendo?

Another reaction paper offers a list of items and asks students if they are: essential, modest, comfortable, luxurious. Consistently, stereo, colour TV, and air conditioning rank right up there with food, clothing and shelter. Values.

Of course commercials are good for *all* of us. They keep the economy perking. Another reaction paper asks if it would be worth giving up the efficiency and convenience of modern urban life for the simpler Mom-and-Pop values of yesteryear. A resounding and consistent 'No!' to that one. Not that the young are so dull-souled that they do not acknowledge old-time values. But, when it comes to a choice between them and creature comforts, they are well lost.

Many ads are patently misleading: 'No toothpaste fights cavities better than Aim'. Not that Aim does a *better* job than any other, just that they are all the same. True also of aspirin and petrol, which are government-regulated. But the majority of Americans pay double for Bayer, because it advertises itself. P. T. Barnum said it: 'There's a sucker born every minute'.

Beneath that surface chicanery, there is a far more corrosive and pervasive lifeview, just as in the programming: image without substance, notoriety without genuine achievement.

That pagan, materialist 'ethic' is so easily demolished it is ludicrous that so many accept it unquestioningly as Holy Writ. Merely consider the 'saints' of that worldview, who 'had it all', money-fame-sex-power greater than all the Caliphs of Baghdad: Elvis, Marilyn, Howard Hughes, John Belushi, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix—and the tragic parade goes on. Each one the perfect embodiment of all the media tout as success. Yet every one of them committed suicide. Odd, if they 'had it all'.

The U.S. Constitution guarantees all human beings (American or not) the inalienable and self-evident rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And we all set out in breakneck pursuit of what the media (and often our own parents) tell us 'happiness' means: living well, feelin' good! But all those people mentioned above were living well—at least materially. Why weren't they feelin' good?

The Greek word for happiness is *eudaimonia*: literally 'a good soul'. Not feeling good, but *being* good. All the old-time values said the same thing. According to that definition of happiness, prisoners marching toward gas chambers with their heads held high were happy. Hitler capering at the humiliation of France was not happy. Just feelin' good.

There is the 180-degree sea-change the media has effected in our world, our lifeview, our souls: 'seem' is greater than 'be'.

*The news*

Journalists are more righteous than Pharisees in their claims to objectivity, and many likely try their best to be. But one cannot help but wonder about the effect on world terrorism, assassinations and hostage-taking if the world press freely imposed a blackout on itself until *after* the situations were resolved. The media even give such animals a spurious legitimacy by reporting their inhuman activities—in progress, making them household names, allowing them to be ‘somebody’. For a while. Notoriety without genuine achievement.

During World War II, the press by common consent never showed President Roosevelt in his wheelchair, lest it impair his ability to command respect. Now any politician had better be as pure—and bland—as Caesar’s wife. We know now that Roosevelt was a womanizer, but that hardly affected his ability to govern—under the worst pressures. But today, ‘the public has a right to know’, a right to new surprises, no matter the price. Otherwise, what would they have to talk about?

The objectivity of the news becomes suspect also when a managing editor, merely by what he or she decides to print or air, is by that very fact editorializing. Consider only the pope’s frequent trips and speeches (which, like moonshots, are becoming increasingly less newsworthy as they lose their surprise value). The pope can talk himself comatose about exploitation, sabre rattling, Third World poverty, but hardly a syllable will make the news. Unless it is about sex. Thus the audience is led to believe he is interested in nothing but matters pelvic.

The news media also rely heavily on polls, as if the objective truth were settled by vote. Every man and woman on the street has an opinion on abortion, politics, and the World Cup winner, but blessed few have ever researched a single one of them: gathered the data, sifted it, put it into some logical sequence so that they could draw a conclusion and put it out to be critiqued. Bertrand Russell said, ‘Many people would rather die than think. Most of them do.’ But every man-jack and woman-joan has an opinion. Where from? One wonders what a pollster would have heard in the days of the Galileo case. There is a definite parallel. Only the source of the certitude has changed.

*Sports*

Professional sports—and the college sports which now serve as their farm system—are no longer sportive. Athletes do not ‘play’

the game; they by-God *work* at it. If Wellington won the battle of Waterloo on the playing fields of Eton, the battle is now actually being 'played' there. Professional athletics is a matter of entertainment and economics, just as in pagan Rome. Games are now geared to be interrupted by commercials, attended by exploding scoreboards, trumpeted cavalry charges, and showgirl 'cheerleaders' who often seem unaware which team is winning. The battles-royal in professional hockey—and the European battles-royal in soccer stadiums—show what athletics have become: *panem et circenses*.

That worldview passes down to the young, at least to males. 'OK, son, go out and give 110 per cent.' Patently absurd. I only *have* 100 per cent. I made mistakes; the opposition was smarter or stronger or more talented. But I gave you my best. Yet the boy feels, unless his team has won, that his father no longer respects him. And too often that is true. An idiocy as flagrant and commonplace as the myth that money-fame-sex-power bring happiness. If winning is the only—or at least most important—thing, even the silver medallist is a shade of loser. Not to mention the ones who trained eight years and got no medals at all.

Relentlessly, we keep returning to the radical antagonism between two diametrically opposed meanings to the word 'value'. This shows clearly in Debbie Thomas, a shoo-in for the women's Olympic figure-skating championship in 1988. Her picture had been on the cover of *Time* magazine. But, inexplicably, she fell, twice. She got 'only' a bronze medal. But the look on that girl's face as she stood on the lowest step of the winners' platform captured a value no amount of cheering could equal. She still held on to her soul. Her pride.

### *Music*

Except for sex, nowhere are the young more touchy than on the subject of rock music, available not only on TV (with some pretty interesting visuals) but also on the indispensable Walkman, so the votary need never be long disconnected from the new-gospel brainwashing. Students insist there are many rock bands like U-2 which are very positive, which is undeniable, and that there simply is no basic 'message' to rock lyrics, which is very, very deniable.

Every news-stand has a huge selection of rock magazines which print the complete lyrics—at least those legally printable. (Double standard, there.) Students grin somewhat sheepishly when you say



'Surely you've noticed the theme that goes, "Baby, it's all over but let's *do* it just one more time"'. Or 'Just to tease me, you hold back. I'll go crazy and do somethin' you might not like.' Which pale to insipidity compared to Rap songs threatening rape, sodomy, and murdering police. But the media—hardly disinterested parties—report how many respected authorities (in rock music) deny all charges of subverting moral values.

Rock concerts—especially heavy metal concerts—are a raw celebration of the unfettered Id. True, total suppression of the Id leads at best to Puritanism and at worst to the pale young men who assassinate public figures. Suppress the Id totally, and it retires within, builds up steam, and sooner or later will erupt in violence or pornography. Both of which are a good definition of truly 'max' concerts: thrashing guitars, screaming voices, thunderously amplified music, performers in skin-tight leather bedizened with bullets, death's heads, and razor blades.

Charges that heavy metal performers have made pacts with Satan are as naively ludicrous as claiming professional wrestling is a sport. The whole thing is hype, and those charges play directly into the pockets of the performers. But the crucial question is never seriously asked in any study I have read: what *in the young audience* craves that kind of stimulus? Some suggest the young are revolting against the uptightness of school, parental expectations, and so forth. (They should have lived back in the 40s—1840 or 1940!) Anyone with eyes and the slightest wisp of objectivity can see heavy metal is a celebration of sado-masochism. Do the members of the audience fantasize themselves as the victims? Or the perpetrators? Is the music like dope, so that one has to get an ever greater jolt? Is heavy metal to rock music what kinky is to sex? I am not qualified to answer those questions, but the questions are certainly real.

### *The new religion*

Echoes have recurred throughout this piece: paganism, Rome, materialism, image without substance. The 'spirituality' engendered, across the board, by our media is a (probably unwitting) atheist and existentialist worldview. There is no framework to give context and meaning to one's life. There is only *now*: the immediate kick, diversion, escape. From what? Reality. The way things are. Escape from the inescapable. Except by suicide.

Freud postulated two principles at work in our lives and choices: *eros*, the pleasure principle, and *thanatos*, the death-wish. *Eros* is the urge to growth, shattering horizons, conversion of expectations about life. *Thanatos* is an urge back to the womb, to perfect passivity, to being-cared-for: to death. We seem in our day to be in headlong pursuit of *eros*, misunderstanding that term as merely self-indulgent sexual fulfilment. But *eros* is in search of growth and all the risks growth entails. Our media do not coax us to that. Our media treatment of sex, news, athletics is not a pursuit of challenge to be surmounted, with the reward of dignity, earned. Our media offer only escape.

### *Thanatos*

As the wise Pogo said, 'We have met the enemy. And he is us.' And as the wise Chesterton said, 'I tell thee naught for thy desire, save that the sky grows darker, and the sea rises higher'. We are all on the *Titanic*, and we have a choice of hymns: 'Nearer my God, to thee', or Peggy Lee's prophetic anthem, 'If that's all there is, my friends, then keep on dancing! Let's break out the booze . . . and have . . . a ball.'

In the end, there is only God or Sisyphus. And Sisyphus sits on all the boards, and regulates the GNP, and buys the movie scripts, and presses the recordings, and reads the news, and hires the players, and . . .