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"Protecting Our Children From a Plague of Pessimism"

Michael Medved
Author, *Hollywood vs. America*

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. 📖



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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 Shavano 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.

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, *Gaudeamus igitur*, 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 seem 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 wholeness 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 pop-

ular 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

Appreciating that world properly is the obvious antidote to the second principal cause of the present plague of pessimism, and that cause is ingratitude—the gross, rank, unforgivable refusal to acknowledge all the countless blessings we enjoy. Most of us understand from personal experience what happens to us if we owe a debt of thanks to an individual—a parent, a spouse, a business colleague—but for some reason we are blocked from expressing our appreciation. Thankfulness 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 dazzling 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 decency and right behavior. At the moment, however, our media, our government, and even our public schools work together to undermine that imperative. Instead of attempting to increase the respect and gratitude children feel for their parents, today's politically correct curricula convey the clear message that the older generation is comprised of a bunch of sexist, racist, homophobic, 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 presence 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 corporal 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 education. The first priority of every school, of every curriculum, of every teacher should be to bring children and parents closer together, not drive them further apart. With disillusioned 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 universities—to smear the extraordinary and honorable 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 as a barrelmaker, and my dad recalls that his father used to come home every day with sore and sometimes bloody hands. Beginning at the age of five, my father used to help him in taking out the splinters. My grandfather never made much financial progress in his life and died in 1958 in the same 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 scholarship 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.

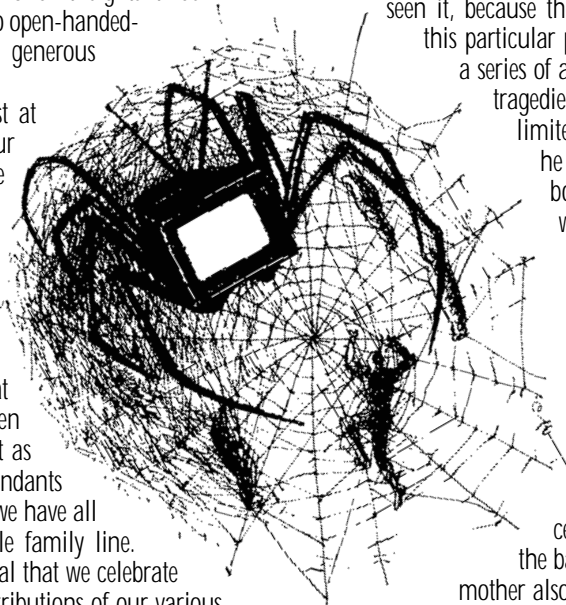
The Uses of Adversity

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



Go ahead. Try it...

History test

Mr. Waldvogel's Class Name _____

DIRECTIONS: Put the following emperors in chronological order:
 _____ Julius Caesar _____ Nero _____ Marcus Aurelius
 _____ Diocletian _____ Constantine _____ Pompey _____ Augustus

1. Of the emperors mentioned above, who was the best? Why? Who was the worst? Give specific examples to support your answer.
2. DEFINE: a) Pax Romana b) Papyrus c) Oratory d) Huns
3. Explain all that you can of Roman schooling and education.
4. Why did the barbarians have so much success against the Roman Empire after 350 AD? Be specific.
5. If you had lived in Rome in 100 AD, what kinds of entertainment would you have seen? Tell me as much as you know of this.

DIRECTIONS: Answer the following essay questions in complete sentences. Be as specific as possible.

1. Detail the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire. How did the Christian God replace the pagan gods? Why did the Romans turn to Christianity? Describe Constantine's role in all this.
2. Compare and contrast the rise to power and rule of Pompey and Julius Caesar. Give examples of their actions towards their friends, enemies, and the people of Rome. Be specific.
3. What are the legacies of the Roman Empire? In other words, what has Rome contributed to Western society? How and why are these contributions important?

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know what you're gonna get." Sure, you could get a nougat, you could get a covered almond, you could get a cherry cordial, but the most important thing about a box of chocolates is that everything it contains is *sweet*. That is the most important lesson we can teach our children: to accept life, even at its most tragic, as a gift from God. As Shakespeare wrote in *As You Like It*, "Sweet are the uses of diversity." If we make the most of our challenges as well as our opportunities, life can indeed be a box of chocolates.

Though associated with a fictional bumpkin in Alabama, that outlook is actually consistent with one of the most ancient and essential elements of the Jewish tradition. For centuries the *Shulchan Aruch*, the precisely detailed "Code of Jewish Law," has regulated the behavior of the religiously observant in every aspect of their lives. The book begins with a single commandment, which we are supposed to keep in mind on each new day as we open our eyes from sleep: "Rise up like a lion for the service of the Lord!"

"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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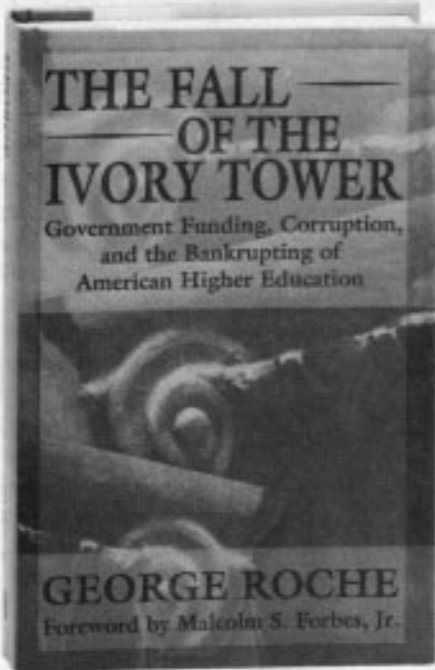
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