

The too-much-information age

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Aug. 27, 2012 My Table Is Spread

A man walks into a bar is the opening line of a joke. A man walks into a movie theater is the opening line of a homicide investigation.

This is the hottest summer in recorded Colorado history. There are forest fires in the mountains. There is gunfire in the city.

On the morning we awoke to the murders in Aurora, I was packing to leave for Disneyland. To our surprise, for end-of-life care is expensive, my mother left a small sum to be divided among her children. I wanted to spend my inheritance as I thought she might have spent it, for something fun. My daughter and I made plans to take the four oldest grandchildren to Disneyland and then to visit family in nearby Los Angeles. Our younger son and his wife, teachers on summer vacation, agreed to join us.



At the last minute, my daughter decided to bring Leo, her 2-year-old son, along on

the trip.

Leo is a sunny child, but he was unprepared for the unceasing sounds and sights of a theme park. Even the headboards in our hotel rooms lit up with tiny electric stars while a tinkly "A Dream Is a Wish Your Heart Makes" played from somewhere within the illuminated wood.

Music was piped into the swimming pool area and all the pedestrian walkways. Giants in costume roamed the park. A ride on the Disneyland train took us into dark tunnels filled with dinosaurs. Seeking to soothe his overheated senses, I took Leo on a boat ride. Just the two of us on a replica of an 18th-century sailing ship, me standing and holding Leo in my arms. There were no special effects to speak of, though statues of wild animals could be glimpsed through the trees. It was the kind of ride on which old people and infants huddled, like refugees from the sound and sight storm.

Still, Leo buried his head in my neck and began the refrain that would carry him through the next two days, "Cover my eyes, Ma-Maw. Cover my eyes."

The two oldest grandchildren, 8-year-old boy cousins born six weeks apart, had their hearts set on riding the ?Tower of Terror.? Their aunt and uncle said they would go with them.

They loved the ride, a series of steep and surprising drops in what appears to be a haunted elevator. But they were troubled, both of them, by the images displayed for the riders.

I did not accompany the boys, but their uncle told me how scenes from the old television series ?The Twilight Zone? create a kind of storyline for what would otherwise be a standard carnival ride, that is, one goes up and comes down in startling and stomach-churning ways.

At some point the elevator doors in the Tower of Terror open onto to the image of a man hanging, dead, from a rope.

Luc told me, ?I wish I had gone on the ride, but I wish I hadn't seen all those pictures.?

Neither his uncle nor his mother nor I knew the script for the ride. We should have known. We should have protected him.

Cover my eyes.

My children are more careful about their children and television than I was with them, and I was more careful about my children and television than my parents were with me.

We were, in language I would not learn until the century in which I was born had ended, early adopters of the new technology. My family was the first in Tulia, Texas, to own a television set. My father thought it was such a wondrous invention that he bought three: one for us, one for his parents and one for his in-laws.

According to family lore, a neighbor, seeking to extol the wonder of my birth, is said to have exclaimed to my mother, ?Betty, this is better?n television.?

And I suppose it did seem like a good idea to invite Sid Caesar and Loretta Young and George Burns and Gracie Allen as guests into the living room.

But as the images have grown ever more violent, and more realistically violent, the guests are less guests and more home invaders. The date has turned into an assault. Sex and violence are confused.

In a college class she teaches on technology, my daughter was disturbed to discover that nearly all her students had first learned of sex through pornography, whether broadcast on television or through the Internet or in movies. Is sex supposed to hurt, to be degrading and humiliating?

And, if not, how do I get those images out of my head?

Cover my eyes.

I don't pretend to understand what goes on in the mind of the human who hunts other humans for sport, or psychic payback. I'm suspicious of those who profess to comprehend the incomprehensible. But there are things I do understand. I understand that, just as words have weight and heft, a substance that settles into us and takes root, images, too, have their power. They burn themselves onto our retinas, and, so, into our brains, and, so, into our hearts.

Since we have visual memory, the repetition of certain violent and degrading images can make them seem

routine, or even entertaining and arousing.

Custody is about safekeeping and protection. Custody of the eyes, then, is about looking at and looking away, each in its proper turn, so that we might see rightly. There are those who must see the body swinging from the rope, those who must remove it and wash it and commit it to the earth. Theirs is a hard work. It is never entertainment. It is never a thrill ride.

Custody is about right belonging. Custody of the eyes, then, is about rescuing from the usurpers what God has given to us and to our children.

Back home again, we gathered for the baptism of the youngest grandchild, Helena Frances. The priest entrusted us with the light of faith ?to be kept burning brightly? in her life.

?When the Lord comes,? he read from the rite, ?may she go out to meet him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom.?

As I witnessed her baptism, I thought how, when the time comes to go out and meet the Lord, Helena will need to be able to see. She will need to see the One to whom she runs. She will need to be able to see the face of Christ and behold in it all goodness and truth, all mercy and joy.

Open her eyes. Open her eyes that she may see you everywhere.

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