

The pharmaceutical solutions of daytime TV

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Jan. 10, 2014 My Table Is Spread

I had a quiet Advent, a waiting, watchful Advent.

I hated it.

I am a liturgist, by training and inclination. There is a record -- both spoken and written -- of me encouraging and exhorting just that: Americans engaging in the elusive Quiet Advent. Like the unicorn and the woman who wears a bathing suit confidently, the QA is, for American mothers and grandmothers at least, the hoped-for-but-never-realized dream. It is a quest.

Like all quests, this one has rules, among them: Put away the 200 dozen butter cookies (iced and decorated) and the 50 loaves of pumpkin bread (baked in seasonal aluminum pans, wrapped in green cellophane and tied with a red ribbon). Forget "World's Best Teacher" mugs and foil-wrapped flashlights for the boy who mows the lawn. Stop shopping as a competitive sport.

Leave the colored roof lights in the basement. Ditto, the inflatable lawn Santa and reindeer.

No snow-covered villages on the coffee table and no garland on the staircase.

Put down your colored ink pens and push away the Christmas cards, address lists and envelopes.

Just stop.

Instead? Read. Pray. Sit quietly. Reflect.

One abdominal surgery later, I was doing exactly that. Not because I'd made a choice to be mindful, but because my body has made a choice to be prone. For Advent.

When I could no longer bear any more mindfulness (whether enforced or chosen -- turns out I like marathon baking, even the grumbling about marathon baking), I had the television. Which is its own form of the anti-Advent (watching other people bake -- seems "Big Meat" is an actual entrée), and, each in its own way, instructive.

Here is some of what I have learned from sitting in front of the TV: Most of the people watching daytime television are ill. They are catheterized. They are diabetic. They get around on motorized scooters. They suffer chronic pain. They have gas/bloating/diarrhea/constipation/ulcerative colitis/Crohn's disease. They've had heart attacks. They have rheumatoid arthritis and high blood pressure and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. They've been injured in work and car accidents. They suffer from "low T." They are impotent.

No one can sleep.

They are also attractive, like touring company versions of Newman and Woodward. They may be aged (or

aging) but they are vital. Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease Man flies kites with his grandchildren. Heart Attack Man dances with his wife. Rheumatoid Arthritis Woman leads museum tours. Diabetics surf. Motor Scooter Folks zoom around the house, a grandchild or pet perched happily on the lap. And Impotent Guy? He enjoys conjugal bliss "when the time is right." On a hillside. Inside a bathtub on top of the hill. (I'm still wondering about that one. Maybe no one should watch TV and take Dilaudid at the same time.)

The only ones who are shown sitting, just sitting, belong to the catheter crowd. But even they are so delighted with the new products in the ad that they can't help but grin. Win the Powerball lottery, get a new catheter: six of one, half dozen of another.

According to the TV gospel, illness is just another adventure. I glance at my sallow face in the mirror. I've buttoned my nightgown wrong. I scratch at a dried splash of soup on the flannel. My hair is matted. It hurts to move, to cough, to laugh or sneeze. I walk, bent over, shuffling from bed to chair to bed again. I trip over my oxygen tube.

Maybe the television sick are grinning because the pharmaceutical companies have solutions to their litany of ills. There are medicines to prevent slow (for which, read, regular) death.

These same drugs increase the risk of sudden death.

A heightened risk of sudden death is the bargain we enter to avoid death altogether.

Of course, there will be no avoiding death. I watch a piece on Apple founder Steve Jobs. He found a transplant surgeon in Memphis, Tenn. He moved there, halfway across the country from his California home, bought a house and waited, sure that he would receive a new liver. He could afford organic foods and state-of-the-art drugs and treatments. He could, perhaps, move ahead of others in the transplant queue. He still died.

I think that's, in part, what Pope Francis meant in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, when he criticized: "A crude and naive trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralised workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting."

These ads are produced for some of the most powerful wielders of economic power in the world. These ads lie and lie and lie. They promise vitality to the weak and life to the dying. They tell the faltering they should be running and the grieving they should be laughing. "Suck it up," is their message but, by "it," they mean their pills and shots and hardware and "procedures."

Sacralised workings, indeed. "Follow us," these wielders of economic power say, "and we will cure you. Or if not cure you, then give you a great quality of life. Who knows, the right combination of our vitamins and supplements may mean you live forever. Or at least make sure you're having sex right into the grave."

I notice the blind and disfigured are never featured in these ads. (Try to picture Vinicio Riva, the man with neurofibromatosis embraced publicly by Francis, in a television ad for anything.) There's no way to make a badly burned face fit the template. I also notice that there are no pictures of actual sick people, no post-op patients shuffling down the ward, clutching an IV pole in one hand and the steadying arm of an aide in the other. The clinically depressed look sad, but never desperate.

A "crude and naive trust" in this vision leads to despair. It sets gauzy impossibility as the expectation, all the while hiding the truth each of us must face. It allows no preparation, no thought, none of the taking stock that can be a gift of illness and injury. "Our days are numbered. How, then, shall we live?"

Meanwhile the excluded -- the ill and actively dying in a culture that worships youth and beauty and vitality --

are still waiting.

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