

CYBERSENSE

BOOKS, VIDEO, AND FAMILY HEALTH

I THINK IT WAS FRANCIS BACON WHO SAID, “SPEECH MAKES A READY MAN, BUT WRITING A CAREFUL ONE.” Conversation, with its unpredictable ebb and flow, tends to promote quick wittedness—whereas, writing a lot teaches you more about organizing thoughts carefully. Similarly, today we might say, “Too much video dulls the mind, while reading enriches it.” Good cybersense is knowledge you need to hold your family together in an increasingly wireless, media-dominated world. How the different media affects your own and your loved ones’ minds is important. Over time, these effects can be profound.

Okay now, video fans, don’t freak. I totally agree that there are videos to die for. *Sukhavati—A Mythic Journey*, with Joseph Campbell’s wise words over a world-wide, on-location film of Earth’s most sacred sites, heals me every time I watch it. Peter Jackson’s momentous realization of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* deserves every accolade it received. Watching it again from time to time, is a profound experience for me. Except perhaps for the endless ending—it is magnificently visual, artistically focused, and compellingly dramatic. It deepens my sense of my own journey. Ken Burns PBS series, *The War*, is newer in my life, but promises to help me grasp the reality my parents grappled with. Even *Cheers*, *Seinfeld*, and *Friends* have brought me laughter in dark times.

So, good video can show us things we would else never see, and combines vision and hearing to drive themes deep into our sub-conscious. BUT—and this is crucial—your own and your children’s imaginations have two aspects. Think of them as *skills* and *content*. When I read *The Lord of the Rings* before the movie was made, my own imaginative *skills* were exercised in the act of reading. *They* were the art director, the costume designer, the set builder, the battle coordinator. Reading allowed and, in a sense, forced ME to envision the action. I conjured up the pictures and MY powers of imagination were strengthened thereby. As also was my reliance on them. That’s not so true for the movie. What I’m taking in there is the content of Peter Jackson’s imagination. I’m glad to have that content,



because it gives me some magnificent material to use my own skills on. But if I lose—or worse—never establish the habit of trusting and using those imaginative muscles, then I am going to be diminished thereby. Indeed, I might very well become addicted to consuming the products of other people’s imaginations.

So there’s the meaning behind, “Too much video dulls the mind, while reading enriches it.” Reading always requires more imaginative input than viewing. It is less fully specified and so bestows more freedom to involve your own and your children’s life experience. Your Aragorn will look like YOUR idea of a hero. Reading requires healthy, helpful mental work on your part. **Bottom line—read more (or continue to read).** There, perhaps, is a modern *niyama* (yogic observance). Read aloud to one another among family and friends. Let young ones read short sections as soon as they can. Explore in conversation now and then what is being created in each other’s minds. YOU are the show—not the damned tube!

Now, were today’s media a sane and healthy enterprise, the likely *yama* (yogic restriction) might be, “Use video in moderation especially for content you cannot get otherwise.” But, unfortunately, video tech-

niques are evolving rapidly in ways that are themselves unhealthy. Awhile back, MTV figured out that, to keep the attention of escape-oriented teeny-boppers, the visuals had to shift abruptly—or do something very dramatic—every six seconds or so. After all, the kids are probably channel surfing, and shifting the image themselves at the slightest hint of boredom. Advertising also learned that a rapidly shifting collage of suggestive but uncompleted actions drives a diffuse kind of feeling right past the intellect and into the subconscious. And computer graphics allowed the creation of photographically real images of impossible and startling events. The colorful name given to all these says it all—*Eye candy*—sweet, possibly addictive, but without nutritional value. Aristotle, over two millennia ago, called it, “Spectacle—the lowest form of drama.”

A new generation of videographers, having grown up with these techniques, now applies them even to documentaries where they really have no place. A lot of what purports to be informative video both caters to and promotes an attention span so weak, and so short—well, even a self-respecting butterfly would be ashamed of it. It won’t do to just show David Attenborough walking towards us as he speaks. Instead they have to startle our eyes. His body suddenly vanishes and reappears larger and closer to us three times in twenty seconds, while the words and mouth movements remain perfectly in synch. Or an otherwise well-intentioned series, the History Channel’s *The Universe*, is filled with stunning but constantly shifting and truly irrelevant visuals. They completely distract from the information it purports to be delivering. Even the smattering of comments direct from the scientists provides nothing more than sound bites—devoid of the nuance that genuine science seeks to unravel, and in some cases actually misleading.

It makes good cybersense to be aware of these evolutions. Explain them and what they do to your children. There is a place for eye-candy, but that place is not everywhere. Another side of today’s media story involves the kinds of messages and themes that tend to dominate. We’ll look at that in the next article. ▲