The Triumph of Triviality

Contributed by John F. Schumaker
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The latest results of the cultural indoctrination stakes are in. Triviality leads, followed closely by frivolity, superficiality, and mindless distraction. Vanity looks great, while profundity is bringing up the rear. Pettiness is powering ahead, along with passivity and indifference. Curiosity lost interest, wisdom was scratched, and critical thought had to be put down. Ego is running wild. Attention span continues to shorten and survival is a long shot.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Half a century ago, humanistic thinkers were heralding a great awakening that would usher in a golden age of enlightened living. Pathfinders like Erich Fromm, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Rollow May, and Viktor Frankl were laying the groundwork for a new social order distinguished by enlightened living. This tantalizing vision was the antithesis of our society of blinkered narcissists and hypnogogic materialists. Dumbness was not our destiny. Planetary annihilation was not the plan. By the 21st century, we were supposed to be the rarefied “people of tomorrow,” inhabiting a sagacious and wholesome world.

Erich Fromm's 1955 tome The Sane Society signaled the debut of the one-dimensional “marketing character” -- a robotic all-consuming creature who is “well-fed, well-entertained, but passive, unalive, and lacking in feeling.” Yet Fromm was confident that we could avoid further descent into the fatuous. He forecast a Utopian society based on the principle of “humanistic communitarianism” that would nurture our higher “existential needs.”

In his 1961 book, On Becoming a Person, Carl Rogers wrote “When I look at the world I am pessimistic, but when I look at people I am optimistic.” While acknowledging consumer culture's seductive invitation to disown our higher selves and enter the pointless dreamland of trinkets and desire, he believed that we -- the “people of tomorrow” – would minister over a growth-oriented society, with “growth” defined as the full and positive unfolding of human potential.

We would be upwardly driven toward authenticity, social equality, and the welfare of coming generations. We would revere nature, realize the unimportance of material things, and hold a healthy skepticism about technology and science. An anti-institutional vision would enable us to fend off dehumanizing bureaucratic and corporate authority as we united in an ongoing realization of our “higher needs.”

One of the most famous concepts in the history of psychology is Abraham Maslow's “Hierarchy of Needs,” often illustrated by a pyramid. Once widely accepted, it was also inspired by a faith in innate positive human potential. Maslow claimed that, rather than being materialistic by design, human beings naturally switch attention to higher-level needs (e.g., intellectual, spiritual, social, existential) once they have met lower-level material ones. In moving up the pyramid, and “becoming,” we channel ourselves toward wisdom, beauty, truth, love, gratitude, and respect for life. Instead of a society that catered to, and thus maintained, the lowest common denominator, Maslow imagined one that prospered in the course of promoting mature “self-actualized” individuals.

But something happened along the way. The pyramid collapsed. Human potential took a back seat to economic potential. Self-actualization gave way to self-absorption on a spectacular scale. A pulp culture flourished as the masses were successfully duped into making a home amidst an ever-changing smorgasbord of false material needs.

Operating on the principle that triviality is more profitable than substance, and dedicating itself to unceasing material overkill, consumer culture has become a fine-tuned instrument for resisting upward growth, and keeping people incomplete, shallow, and dehumanized. Materialism continues to gain ground, even in the face of impending eco-apocalypse.

Pulp culture is a feast of tinsel and veneer. The ideal citizen is hollow, an empty tract through which gadgets can pass quickly, largely undigested, so there is always space for more. Reality races by as a blur of images, surface impressions, and consumer choices that never feel quite real. We know it as the fast lane and whip ourselves to keep apace.

Rollo May described it accurately in his 1953 book Man’s Search for Himself:
“It’s an ironic habit of human beings to run faster when they have lost their way.” So it’s largely business-as-usual even as the sky is falling.

Some critics did predict the triumph of the trivial. In his 1957 essay “A Theory of Mass Culture,” Dwight MacDonald foresaw our “debased trivial culture that voids both the deep realities and also the simple spontaneous pleasures,” adding that “the masses, debauched by several generations of this sort of thing, in turn come to demand trivial cultural products.” Today, the demand for triviality has never been higher, and our tolerance for seriousness has never been lower.

In this dense fog, the meaningful and meaningless can easily get reversed. Losers look like winners, and the lofty and

ludicrous get confused. The caption under a recent ad for men's underwear read "I've got something that's good for your body, mind, and soul." Fashion statements become a form of literacy, brand names father pride, and celebrity drivel becomes compelling.

Not even God has been spared. Once a potent commander of attention and allegiance, God has been gelded into a sort of celestial lap dog who fetches our wishes for this-world success. Nothing is so great that it can't be reconceived or rephrased in order to render it insubstantial, non-threatening, or, best of all, entertaining.

The age of trivialization has left its mark on marriage, family, and love. In a recent A. C. Nielsen Co. survey, when asked to choose between spending time with their fathers and watching television, 54 percent of American 4-6 year-olds chose television. The same study reported that American parents spent an average of 3.5 minutes per week in "meaningful conversation" with their children, while the children themselves watch 28 hours of television per week. To which we can add cell phones, computer games, and other techno-toys that are inducing a state of digital autism in our young people.

Out of this cock-up comes the most pressing question of our age. Can a highly trivialized culture, marooned between fact and fiction, and dizzy with distraction and denial, elevate its values and priorities in order to respond effectively to the multiple planetary emergencies looming today? Empty talk and token gestures aside, it doesn't appear to be happening.

Some of the great humanists felt that there are limits to a culture's ability to suppress our higher needs. They assumed that we are ethical creatures by nature and that we will do the right thing when necessary -- we will transcend materialism given the freedom to do so. That seems a bit far-fetched given the ethical coma in which we find ourselves. Yet the ultimate test is whether or not we can do the right thing by the planet and for future generations.

Ethics and politics have never sat well together. When 'citizens' became 'consumers', political life became an exercise in keeping the customer happy. The marketing-style democracies we have today have never been tested with planetary issues, such as global warming and climate change, demanding radical and unsettling solutions. In the race against the clock, politicians appear almost comical as they try not to disturb the trivial pursuits propping up our dangerously obsolete socio-economic system.

Global calamity is forcing us into a post-political era in which ethically driven individuals and groups race ahead of the political class. Soon centre-stage will belong to culture change strategists who are able to inspire leaps of consciousness independently of hapless follow-the-leader politics. One such person is Jan Lundberg (www.culturechange.org). Lundberg is an environmental activist and a long-standing voice for pre-emptive culture change who understands that hyper-consumerism trivializes reality and numbs people, even to prospects of their own destruction. In his essay "Interconnectedness of All in the Universe," he writes: "Unless we broaden and deepen our perception of both the universe and our fellow members of society, we all may perish in persisting to manipulate each other and our ecosystem with materialism and exploitation."

Culture change strategists all agree about the urgent need to promote "global consciousness," or "cosmic consciousness" -- a broad worldview with a high level of awareness of the interrelatedness and sacredness of all living things. It is thought that such a universality of mind leads not only to intellectual illumination, but also to heightened moral sensibilities, compassion, and greater community responsibility.

Behind the scenes are some noteworthy organizations working toward the goal of global consciousness, including The World Commission on Global Consciousness and Spirituality (www.globalspirit.org) whose members consist of Nobel laureates, culture theorists, futurists, and spiritual leaders including The Dalai Lama. The group points out the huge backlog of positive human potential that is ready to unleash itself once we assume control and carve healthier cultural pathways for people's energies. According to their mission statement, the fate of humankind and the ecosystem lies in our ability over the next couple of decades to revise our cultural blueprints in order to foster global consciousness and create new and more "mindful" political and economic models.

Even in the formal education system, a small but growing number of teachers are incorporating a "Global Awareness" perspective, aimed at dissolving cultural barriers and building a sense of global community (e.g., www.globalawareness.com). Some are even encouraging a "global grammar" that links students both to other human beings and to the entire planet.

In the war against trivialization some groups speak of "planetization" as the expansive worldview that can slow our cultural death march. It was French philosopher, paleontologist and Jesuit priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who coined this term in calling for a global mind that fused our ecological, spiritual, and political energies, and thereby paved the way for harmonious living and lasting peace. The organization Planetization Rising (www.planetization.com) sees this next phase as the only means by which we can ascend to a higher knowledge and thereby find a life-sustaining path for ourselves and the Earth: "It's the next watershed mark in our evolutionary journey which alone can provide us with the empowerment and insight needed to overcome the gathering forces of ecological devastation, greed, and war which now threaten our survival."

The cultural indoctrination race is not over. The losers are still winning and the odds for a revolution of consciousness are no more than even. But is there an alternative other than to drown in our own shallowness?

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Further reading:

"Interconnectedness of all in the universe:
Doom and gloom? Your perception calls the tune" by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #74, September 8, 2004

culturechange.org

"Can the ecopsychologically disturbed citizenry question legitimacy of rulers?" (first of two parts) by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #68, July 14, 2004

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"Factors of instability for a disturbed population: Are Americans fukked?" (second of two parts) by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #69, July 24, 2004

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