



Humanum

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WITNESS

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Witness: The Challenge of Discernment

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William Gibson once wrote, “I’ve never really been very interested in computers themselves. I don’t watch them; I watch how people behave around them. That’s becoming more difficult to do because everything is ‘around them.’”

My seven-year old Henry wanted to emulate his uncle and make some perfume. He got dill, basil, and lavender from the garden and ground them up with olive oil from the kitchen, and then asked me to update his blog with a photo of him at work.[1] Later he asked me to find pictures of *Despicable Me 2* on Google Image Search; like his father he craves and hoards pictures, but also uses them as inspiration; I see echoes of them in his drawings. The medium of a connected computer enables my son to engage actively in publishing, via his blog – an activity impossible before the net. The same medium facilitates browsing for pictures galore, which without supervision, even in the case of children approaching adulthood, easily becomes passive and, without moderation, as deadening as too much television.

I began collecting images and other resources online long before my marriage, and I turned my fondness for collecting to the purpose of preparing to educate my future children. If my experience of teaching had not already made me realize that such material must be selected with care, this process certainly did. I found that almost any image search leads straight to material I would not want my children to view. Of course, parental censorship has always been exercised over manifestations of the culture impinging on the home: for example, newspapers and television. The problem is not new to this generation, but perhaps it is more intense.

The modern dualism of intellect and will – well ensconced in contemporary schooling – makes it impossible to deal with these challenges: discernment is only possible when the heart is engaged. And only the awakened heart is strong enough to live in the culture while remaining untainted, filtering out what is good. Our schooling, as C.S. Lewis argued in *The Abolition of Man*, will tend to underdevelop the heart. The ensuing “men without chests” lack the organ that enables them both to discern truth and goodness, and to experience wonder.

When my children watch David Attenborough's nature documentaries, I wonder what they pick up of the despairing environmentalism that pervades them, clashing with the gee-whizz production values. If my childhood experience is anything to go by, it is the moods that endure in the affective memory, and that later taint experiences such as finding an abandoned nestling in the garden – moods that have never left me.

In working with home-schooling families I have come across an attitude of fear, or rather a way of dealing with the fear that must be the common lot of all parents: there is a world “out there” beyond parental control, which lays claim to our children and which, by default, cannot be trusted. It is not even about only the usual suspects of porn, peer-pressure, perverts....

My parents were among those who in the 70s entrusted their sons' religious and moral formation to a particular Catholic school. They did not suspect that they were actually paying for experimental masses, lax sexuality, and a liberal humanities faculty. The majority of my fellow students left school stripped of their faith. Those whose faith and practice survived had attended clubs where the culture was embraced but in a more savvy way and without sacrificing orthodoxy; these institutions had at the heart of their mission the education of the heart in the truth, discerning that truth wherever it existed within the prevailing culture.

Something must have been missing from both the school and those homes whose sons never persevered. Nothing surprising here. Those families that by contrast opt for actively insulating their children from the culture might be expected to succeed better at preserving their children's faith and right principles. However, it often seems to be the case that “protection” is given more thought than how the children will cope when eventually that shielding influence is removed, when they leave the protecting nest and have to engage with the culture like it or not. The astuteness towards the culture that I observed in the boys' club I attended as a teen seems absent in these homes, and I have a sense of foreboding about them, notwithstanding all the family rosaries they recite.

Strict supervision is becoming impossible in any case. It used to be sufficient to vet newspapers and magazines, and plan television viewing. Digital media now also reach into the home, and would increase the burden of vetting beyond the feasible, even if it were possible, given the spontaneous and stochastic nature of seeking content and contacts on the net.

After holding out a long time, the head of my children's independent Catholic primary school permitted his fifteen-year-old daughter to use Facebook, but only on condition that she allow him to look over her shoulder at random. He told me that the lack of trust and invasion of privacy that this implied brought a new awkwardness to their relationship, in light of which he regrets having imposed that condition. I would venture that this individual – for whom Thomas More's letter to William Gonell is bedside reading and who lives what he preaches – had already done in her early years all that could be done to prepare his daughter for Facebook, in comparison with which any strategy undertaken *ad hoc* for dealing with particular situations would pale into insignificance.

Still the fear and self-doubt were evident. How much more formidable the doubt in parents less well-informed about education or less conscious of the early work of formation of the heart than this energetic Catholic headmaster, or those brought up in a culture of dependency, reliant on external authorities to control media content.

“Catholics Unplug your Televisions”[2] has a fundamentalist whiff that I suspect drives away all but a certain kind of radical constituency. Their narrow focus prompts the question, increasingly heard in the internet era, of why only *this* particular screen-based medium? The computer is taking over the functions of the TV. Though Marshall McLuhan made us conscious

of the necessary physiological effects of the medium and the consequent effects on our psyche, for effect he overstated his case that the content is a red herring. In addition, his mission was scientific and academic, not didactic.

Apart from the obvious case of grossly inappropriate content, my chief concern as a parent is not content or neurological numbing, but lost opportunities. In the spirit of Maria Montessori, I cringe when I see my children before the computer or the TV because I know they are missing the chance to draw, dance, or play with sticks, leaves, and mud at a pace programmed by themselves (assisted by us). When they crave more time before a screen, I try to provide interesting alternatives that remove that intermediary. And observation reveals – their initial disgruntled reaction soon forgotten – how much greater is their satisfaction and joy when playing with reality not virtuality, or listening to a story told by my wife or myself. (Incidentally I share my wife’s discomfort at reading to them from a Kindle, but find it hard to define why – perhaps it is again the difference between relating to a screen and to a physical, real-world object such as a book.)

The British Prime Minister recently said he wants all pornography to be blocked by filters set up at ISPs’ premises in order to “protect children.” This is not technically possible, for “the net treats censorship as a defect and routes around it,” according to John Gilmore,[3] a founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation. But let us suppose it could be done: what arbitrary authority would decide the line between art that contains chaste depiction of nudity and porn, for example? Numerous other questions arise concerning the delegation of moral policing of the home to an arbitrary civic authority, the vetting of this authority, its ambivalent relationship with business and ideological lobbies and the gross breach of subsidiarity.

A basic knowledge of internet technology and human nature suffices to reveal Cameron’s statement as a political gesture pandering to the fears of his constituency. However, the fact that he judges it politically expedient to make such a gesture and gets away with it reveals something about many parents’ and educators’ lack of confidence in their own discernment, their dearth of basic technical knowledge, and their reliance on the State for moral protection.

I come back to the realization that the locus of culture is in the individual human heart and in the home. Just as there cannot be a global, national, or “internet-wide” entity responsible for content, there is likewise no clear-cut, easily identifiable, and isolable enemy. The enemy is not “out there”: it is in our fallen nature as much as in putative predators of various descriptions. Those best placed and most highly motivated to cultivate, educate, and protect their children’s hearts can only be parents. So we are confronted by the challenge of educating parents.

Rousseau’s romantic notion of childhood innocence is not credible to parents who actually take responsibility for their own children. Though they may well share his belief that “society” is what corrupts, and find no lack of evidence for this, in the final analysis society is as much what takes place in the home as what takes place in the world. Discernment of what is good in what postmodernity offers us (as is again patently obvious to actual parents) cannot be delegated to schools or government agencies, let alone automated systems. The naive heart must be protected, and discernment refined. The only alternative is an infantilized citizenry craving or resenting censorship by some superior entity, but seeing no viable alternative.

[1] <http://doingdang.blogspot.co.uk/2013/07/creating-fragrances.html>.

[2] <http://www.cutunplugtv.co.uk/>.

[3] John Gilmore's web site: <http://www.toad.com/gnu/>.

