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When All You've Ever Wanted isn't Enough

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It used to be that I would turn on the television late at night to relax; to be entertained; to forget about the stresses of daily living. There were the Munsters, the Andy Griffith Show, The Twilight Zone, Leave It to Beaver. There is no place for worry about the economy, which politician has said nasty things about another, which celebrity has gone into rehab; right before going to sleep. It leaves room for far too many restless nights.

Back then, late-night sitcoms and science-fiction were peppered with such benign commercials as, "Bryl Cream, a little dab will do it", Mr. Whipple whining, "Don't squeeze the Charmin", or at worst, the man from Alka Selzer moaning, "I can't believe I ate the whole thing."

Lately, though, when I turn on the television, I find myself bombarded with commercials that cause me a great deal of distress. One I recently viewed, left me sitting upright in bed, indignant at its message. In the opening scene a man and his wife are at home, thinking about the possibility of replacing their television with a "hi-definition" flat-screened edition. Cut to the "appliance superstore" where the man is

sitting in a recliner, cell phone in hand looking at a huge tv screen. In the background a song is playing with increasing volume. The words are, "I want it all, I want it all, I want it all, and I want it NOW!" At this point I wondered what the ad was about. Was it for televisions?, for lounge chairs?, for cell phones? I realized while I listened, that the man was text messaging his bank, and soon it all became clear: from the appliance store the man was texting his bank in order to gain on-the-spot credit approval for the purchase. The commercial ends with the couple in their living room, watching their new flat-screen tv, while the voice-over cleverly puns, "Chase what matters."

"Chase what matters"? Since when does the instant gratification of a desire to buy a television constitute chasing what matters? Have the goals we set for ourselves and the desire to realize them come down to pursuit and immediate acquisition of inanimate objects?

It seems that we have lost the sense of how to identify for ourselves what **really** matters. I can isolate two processes within American society that have, over the past several decades, contributed to a change in how we interact with one another, and I would go so far as to say--have changed the way we understand values and priorities.

The first is a much wider use of increasingly sophisticated technology that provides us with fast-moving images, sound bites and instant gratification. There are text messaging and email access by phone, Blackberries, Bluetooth and I-pods.

Listening to music is by and large a solitary activity; nothing like in my youth group days, when we all piled into the den of a friend's home to listen together to the latest release of Simon and Garfunkel. Like anything else in our lives, these technological developments are neither a negative nor a positive in and of themselves. They clearly have the potential to enhance our ability to communicate vital information in times of emergency, or to access helpful information when doing research. The increasing number of hours we spend using these technologies, however, exacerbates the problem of isolation, and reduces our face-to-face contact. We are only beginning to become aware of their impact upon us as a society.

The second process is an increased stress within American culture on the cultivation of the individual. If the 1960's can be coined a decade of communal activism, the first decade of the 21st century can be called the decade of the "me" generation. When all is said and done, with the increased focus upon the cultivation of our individuality, we often find ourselves alone and feeling empty.

How do we avoid isolation and loneliness? In the creation story in the book of Genesis, we read that God completed the creation of Adam, the first human being. The very next thing God says in chapter two verse eighteen, is, "*It is not a good thing for man to be alone. I will make him a fitting partner.*" From the earliest days of human

presence upon this earth, we are instructed regarding the centrality of companionship. Meaningful relationships with others are a powerful antidote to loneliness.

And what of feelings of emptiness? Part of our enterprise as human beings is to search for the ultimate purpose of our lives. This is one of the things that separate us from animals. When we are young, we tend to equate “meaning” with “happiness”: “If only I could find the right person to marry; if only I could build my dream home; if only I could be successful in my career—then I would be happy for the rest of my days. But happiness is elusive. As popular author Harold Kushner suggests,

“The happiest people you know are probably not the richest or most famous, probably not the ones who work hardest at being happy by reading the articles and buying the books and latching on to the latest fads. I suspect that the happiest people you know are the ones who work at being kind, helpful and reliable, and happiness sneaks into their lives while they are busy doing those things.”

So what constitutes making meaning in our lives? Many philosophers have penned treatises on this subject. Kohelet, or Ecclesiastes, in our Bible is one of these. In the opening lines of the book, we hear him declare, *“What point is there in working hard? One generation passes and another comes along, but the world remains the same forever.”* (1:4) In search of the ultimate meaning of life, Ecclesiastes traveled five

paths: the path of selfishness and self-interest, the path of renouncing all bodily pleasures, the path of wisdom, the path of avoiding all feelings in an effort to avoid pain and the path of piety and religious surrender. For Ecclesiastes all these turned out to be dead-end paths. If all is “vanity of vanities”, to what end would such a book be included in the Bible? Nowhere else do we read that what we do as humans does not matter. This cannot be the message behind Ecclesiastes. Rather, I believe, its message lies in the following words of Harold Kushner,

“Our souls are not hungry for fame, comfort, wealth or power. Those rewards create almost as many problems as they solve. Our souls are hungry for meaning, for the sense we have figured out how to live so that our lives matter, so that the world will be at least a little bit different for our having passed through it.”

Mitch Albom, author of Tuesdays with Morrie, offers us a roadmap. He says, *“The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning.”*

When all we have ever wanted isn't enough—not the big-screen tv, nor the dream home, nor financial success, we must look to the realm of the spirit and to one another to discover the truths of life's meaning.

Rabbi Alvin Fine gives beautiful voice to the perception of life's worth:

Birth is a beginning, and death a destination;

But life is a journey, a going – a growing from stage to stage.

From childhood to maturity and youth to age.

From innocence to awareness and ignorance to knowing;

From foolishness to discretion and then perhaps to wisdom...

From joy to gratitude, from pain to compassion,

And grief to understanding– from fear to faith.

From defeat to defeat to defeat – until, looking backward or ahead,

We see that victory lies not at some high place along the way,

But in having made the journey,

Stage by stage – a sacred pilgrimage...

When we have the courage to listen to our inner voice—to go on a journey toward ourselves, then we truly have the power to be a blessing to others.