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Radical Decency Reflection #1
July 9, 2010

Movie As Propaganda

I saw a movie a few days ago called Extraordinary Measures. At the end I had a sense of clarity about what had just happened to me. I would sum it up as being seduced and appalled at my own easy seduction.

The movie was about a father of 2 children, both suffering from a debilitating disease certain to kill them by the time they are 10. He is our hero. A Harvard MBA, a rising executive at Bristol-Meyers, AND a patient and devoted husband and father who (by implication) makes it to every recital.

Just for starters, how is that for a glib, unrealistic role model? The implication of this – and many other popular culture models like it – is that this is the standard for which we must strive – to be a winner in the competitive race and a devoted family person. Since it is so difficult to achieve – and even more difficult to maintain over time – it is not the positive, inspirational ideal it purports to be. Instead, in the real lives of real people, it is a prescription for frustration, shame, and a sense of failure. We are constantly measuring ourselves against impossible to achieve standards and – surprise, surprise – coming up short. Or, for the “lucky” minority that can compete, we exhaust ourselves and neglect such more “optional” endeavors, such as community, leisure, study, speculative reflection, and play.

But for me, the real kicker of the movie was its more specific messages. And again, they are messages that saturate our culture.

The first is that you can do anything if you try hard enough. Our hero finds THE scientist who is on to a cure, quits his job, forms a start up, sells the start up to corporate America to keep the project going, and then defies the corporation in order to give the miraculous cure to his 2 kids. And, of course, the cure works! Wow, what a pernicious message! Notwithstanding the enormous number of stories that glorify the heroic individual that defies the odds and “makes it happen”, this is in fact a pernicious distortion of real life. In all but a statistically minute number of cases, terminal ill children die. Also, most start ups fail, and executive who heroically and emotionally stand up to their bosses get fired.

Which brings me to the second pernicious message of the movie: While the corporate bosses are mostly heartless and bottom line orient, guess what? At end, they have a heart. They allow our heroes children to be part of the initial test for the new wonder drug. The problem? Corporations are not, in the end, run by good people who will do the right thing in the end. BAD, MISLEADING MESSAGE. In fact, they fire people without remorse, and at their worst, facilitate (in a condoning culture) injury, disease and death.

The final message that jumped out at me is that disease and disability and even injustice all come dressed up in pretty little, socially acceptable, packages. The dying children are adorable, feisty, funny, charming. And so it the dad, the agent of change. When I consulted with the staff at the Variety Club, years ago, they complained bitterly that the donors wanted “pretty little white girls in wheel chairs.” The reality: disability and injustice are inflicted on real people (and disproportionately on the poor and uneducated). Often anger, ugliness, emotional imbalance, selfishness, etc are part of the package. And, people who seek real change are usually not saints either. So do we ignore “ugly” injustice and stop listening to obnoxious agents of change? That is, I submit, one of the implicit message of this movie, and so many other, similar, pieces of popular culture like it.

I could go on, but will stop here.

One final thought however. I was seduced by the hero and his family, and the curmudgeonly and unemotional but ultimately, nice and soft hearted corporate types. And by the story itself. This is not just pernicious propaganda. It is also, if my instinctual reaction is typical (and I think it is), highly effective propaganda. If there is any clarity of thought in this think piece, it has literally taken me a life time to work through the obscuring and dense haze of our culture to get there.