

As If Hope Matters: A Critique of Modern Storytelling

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By my faith and hope, I conjure thee: cast not away the hero in thy soul! -- Friedrich Nietzsche

Will Rogers called Colorado a grand seat from which to see the world, but on April 20, 1999, grief clouded our vision. Despair hung tenaciously in the thin air. For weeks, it seemed we had lost even the blue skies, full of promise, on which we rely. Perhaps relentless self-examination will yet restore the crystal clarity we often take for granted.

A year later, the shootings at Columbine have precipitated some obvious corrections. It's hard for even the National Rifle Association to argue anymore that easy access to all guns is essential in a peaceful society. Despite distinguished gutlessness on the part of many politicians, some gun control legislation is falling sporadically into place. The extravagant violence of some films and video games was thrown into sharp relief, and we justifiably question the necessity of such extremes.

But sadly, Columbine was only the most macabre of several school shootings in recent years, and young vigilantes continue to test the waters of mayhem. This spike in callow rage must herald a systemic despair. We would be foolish to assume otherwise. So it's time to dig deeper. More efficient gun control is a good start. But I want to know what makes intelligent, promising kids so desperate that mass murder looks like a way out. Examining violence in the media is a good start. But does anyone seriously believe that the problem is as simple as “monkey see, monkey do?”

As a lifelong involuntary nonconformist, I am as disturbed by the reactionary geek profiling that Columbine provoked as by the shootings themselves. In our zeal to defend our children, we might easily isolate original thinkers and intensify their anguish over their inability to conform. When you have few confidantes, few avenues of expression and have been singled out as dangerous, the smirk of the cynic is irresistibly comforting.

Behind the smirk lies the empty face of despair. Cynicism fills the vacuum left by dashed hopes and diminished expectations. It's an easy but deceptive refuge, especially seductive to those who have not learned and are not being taught how to filter the crescendo of modern noise. We seldom realize the price it exacts. It doesn't just make our lives smaller, it devours the defenseless.

What fuels this ongoing hopelessness? Poet Muriel Rukeyser said the universe is composed not of atoms and molecules but of stories. Through story lenses and mirrors we try out possibilities, expand our range of experiences and ultimately define ourselves. Stories come in all forms and from everywhere: through conversation, song, books, videos, plays, movies, even advertising. It's hard to overestimate their power. Myths, the elemental stories that Joseph Campbell called “public dreams,” have inspired and guided countless generations through cultural evolution by imbuing bewildering circumstance with resonant meaning. To get to the root of our collective trouble, we might reasonably ask what stories we are telling ourselves and to what end.

I believe the stories we are telling ourselves are largely dispiriting. I came away from *Pulp Fiction* and its endless clones feeling not just depressed but diminished. Minor aspects of these films are admirable, but it seems their thematic, mindless carnage does little more than scythe or stunt vital sensibilities. Sure, depraved individuals exist, but must we revel in all that attempts to negate the sanctity of life? I admire many stories that document journeys through cesspools, but wallowing seems pointless and demeaning. I don't require happy endings but cannot endure a systematic dismantling of the mainspring of hope that pulls me out of bed every morning.

What concerns me is not that hyper-explicit, cynical movies exist but that few alternatives are available, especially for vulnerable teens trying to out-cool each other. The mix of available date movies is skewed toward the bleak and urban. In the tortured reviews that try to justify their brutality, even the humor is inevitably characterized as black. We're stuck on the dark side because virtually anything can be passed off as 'camp,' and this is continually allowed to pre-empt legitimate criticism.

Great diversity in art is, of course, essential. All sorts of stories should be told. These films are fine unto themselves, but it's troubling that they are apparently the standard for modern filmmaking. In tried-and-true fashion, filmmakers remake *Pulp Fiction ad nauseum*, thinking it's cool and still somehow original. So kids seldom see real heroes anymore -- characters of every stripe showing the way to life-enhancing empathy and growth. We seem to have ruled out power and inspiration just when we need them most. Frank Capra's agonizing *Everyman* has been offed by a glib hit man. The counterbalance of hope is gone.

It would be easy to blame this copycat fever on the financial riskiness of studio filmmaking but, ironically, the army of Tarantino wannabes tend to take the independent route of their hero. This conveniently bestows a cachet of originality. The arrogance of youth allows them to believe they are being original even as they unroll the tattered blueprints of fashionable misanthropy.

I don't object to violence per se, but to pointlessness being the point. *Pulp Fiction* and *Saving Private Ryan* are both violent, disturbing films, but while the former left me feeling disgusted and helpless, the latter left me feeling grateful and inspired. *Saving Private Ryan* actually stirred battle rage in me. For a blind instant, I wanted to kill. But in the end those fleeting emotions only drove home the film's essential ideas: that war is a vivid hell that must not be considered lightly and that the individual sacrifices in war can be so great that they must not be taken for granted, lest we repeat them. Such relevance is the difference between crafting a myth and staging a train wreck.

Storytelling is the most important thing we do, but story listening is a close second. My wife and I have not watched television for many years, as we prefer to carefully select stories from the spewing media cornucopia and control, to some degree, how they are revealed. It's amazing to us how many kids are permitted to place themselves casually in the line of edgy electronic fire. They're getting the stuffing -- the delicacy and subtlety -- knocked out of them because they have neither the time nor experience to place ideas and images in context. It's no wonder cynicism prevails.

Though I feel *Saving Private Ryan* is a great film, it so effectively re-creates the experience of war that I have watched it only once. It will be some time before I'm ready to don the helmet and rifle again. When I do, it will be with reverence. If we teach our kids nothing else, we should teach them that reverence, that depth of feeling. It's a short step from understanding the sanctity of a truly meaningful tale to understanding the sanctity of life itself.

The outlandish situations and dialogue of *Pulp Fiction* prompt some to go so far as to assert that it's great comedy. These people chide me for having dainty sensibilities, but I simply cannot feel amused while watching someone bleed to death. Life is precious.

Boys especially crave action and adventure, but context, as usual, is everything. When I was in junior high, a group of us became enamored with *Jeremiah Johnson*. We reeled off colorful mountain man dialogue and imagined ourselves carving out romantic lives in the wilderness. Some scenes in the movie are shocking, but the heroic context is clear. My friends and I understood that the story's engaging iconoclasts accepted some violence as the price of near-total freedom. It wouldn't have occurred to us to run out and buy a flintlock; beauty and independence were what set us dreaming.

On the day the shootings occurred near my home, I received a letter from a Hollywood producer complaining that the script I had sent was not "edgy" enough. This is a new usage of the adjective that I doubt anyone can precisely define. As near as I can tell from reviews, it means cruel or *Pulp Fiction*-like. Try this: enter "edgy" in various search engines. You may come away believing it's illegal to discuss adolescents or independent films without using the word gratuitously. So the storytellers and their target audience have merged. This may seem a good thing until you realize that what they have in common is immaturity and a fascination with mindless savagery.

As kids of every generation try on various ways of being, they often become morbidly fixated on the romance of tragedy. At that crucial juncture, someone or something must challenge them to keep growing and finally glimpse the larger tapestry of life -- which both intensifies the aching beauty of self and rescues one from it. Yet too often modern quests for meaning turn up celebrations of meaninglessness. We aren't providing or even maintaining all the tools necessary to help modern kids get over themselves and turn outward. Adults once reminded us that "anyone can be a smart-ass," but now the message is often, "Go ahead, nothing matters anyway." So it has become cool to be cruel. Apparently the dominant idea is that we must climb into the pit of cynicism with kids to entertain them. Why aren't we building more ladders?

Storytelling is the one responsibility that mature adults should not abdicate. Much is made of the fact that high school kids now fill most movie theater seats. Some see that as an excuse for a steady ration of irresponsible stories about irresponsible people. But we forget how children continually project themselves into the future. Small children idolize teenagers, and teenagers idolize young adults. Surveys of adolescent filmgoers show clearly that kids don't want to see themselves on the screen. They want to see what they might *become*.

You may assume that my taking exception to the edgy genre is sour grapes. It's certainly possible, and perhaps even likely, that the lack of edginess in my stories is a convenient excuse for rejection. But I've heard the plea for edgy often enough now to wonder if there's much of a market for anything else. And I think sometimes it's necessary to fight for the stories you want to tell. I'm not interested in exploring how shallow, self-absorbed people go about brutalizing each other. Intimacy and transformation are the essential elements I want to convey. This is fuel for dreams, for imaginative expressions of newfound belief.

Meaningful movies are still being made, thankfully. *Waking Ned Devine* and *Shakespeare In Love* did much to restore my faith in the medium. But these are a precious few, and dribble out slowly. Casting about for hope, I am gratified to see that, though edgy is depressingly dominant, at least there seems to be some expansion within the genre. *American Beauty* is not just this year's *Pulp Fiction*, though both films are cynical, violent and have been much over-praised. *Beauty* is not my cup of tea, but I'd say it's still a cut above its brethren. It portrays some degree of growth and intimacy, occasionally artfully, and provides a commendable glimpse of the transcendence possible in all circumstances. Some apparently even find it inspirational. (Though, of course, the protagonist must be graphically murdered just as he is transcending suburban hell.) I hope this means the pendulum is starting back, and that we'll eventually see a trend towards meaning, if not subtlety.

The standard response to the accusation that storytellers are letting us down is that stories simply reflect how we live. They are mirrors, not transmogrifiers. There is a chicken-or-egg quality to the debate about whether art creates or mimics (mocks?) reality. But, in essence, it does both. The best stories are grounded in the familiar but insinuate the heady limitlessness of human potential. The idea that stories are only mirrors looks half-baked alongside the power of myth well documented throughout history. Stories can follow but should also lead.

I believe that as we grow collectively more self aware, we feed an accelerating self-fulfilling prophecy. We are becoming what we imagine ourselves to be. The question now is whether we will permit some holocaust to seem inevitable, in which case we will make it so. As the global communication engine magnifies and reinforces self-loathing, hope withers. A deadly, cumulative misanthropy can and may obliterate us. Realists point out with some justification that there's little to engender hope these days. We are in the midst of a sixth period of mass extinction in the Earth's history -- the first one that is entirely attributable to human proliferation and behavior. Catastrophes come with depressing and expected regularity.

Whether we are capable of moving beyond evil and evolutionary stagnation will always be debatable. But hope "springs eternal" because hope is essential to survival. In that primal context, what is true is secondary to what we believe. Athletes and soldiers understand this well. I would go so far as to say that even if all seems lost, we have everything to gain by proceeding as if -- engaging in stories as if -- we can and will rise to every occasion. Our kids deserve that. More important, we might learn along the way that the mirror of perception and influence truly is mutable -- that we really are the dreams we dream.

British writer J.B. Priestley articulated what's at stake in the conclusion of *Literature and Western Man* (1960):

Even if we believe that the time of our civilisation is running out fast, like sugar from a torn bag, we must wait. But while we are waiting, we can think and feel and behave *as if* our society were already beginning to be contained by religion, *as if* we were certain that Man cannot even remain Man unless he looks beyond himself, *as if* we were finding our way home in the universe. We can stop disinheriting ourselves. We can avoid both the hubris and the secret desperation of our scientific 'wizards who peep and mutter.' We can challenge the whole dehumanising, depersonalising process, under whatever name it may operate, that is taking the symbolic richness, the dimension in depth out of men's lives, gradually inducing the anesthesia that demands violence, crudely horrible effects, to feel anything at all.

Each of us is a story without an ending. Collectively we are a story without an ending. But we can start living as if we have some idea where we want to go and as if we are capable of getting there. Of the stories we use to suggest possibilities, true mythology is the organic archetype for living *as if* in the boldest way. It assumes a future and provides a framework of healing symbols. Heroic stories -- beyond ego, beyond motionless yearning -- fuel the quantum leaps required of our culture and species. Hopeful, imaginative myths rise above grotesque posturing to explore exhilarating and familiar new landscapes. They set us dreaming the dreams of all that may be, and we can't get enough of that.

Writer Mary McDermott Shideler said, "Hope is not merely an emotion that comes and goes. It is a virtue, resulting from a conscious, deliberate choice and long practice." We cannot defeat

cynicism and despair with censorship, religious proselytizing or any other of the literal reactions we lazily substitute for abstract reasoning. But if we can nurture a fundamental belief in ourselves as integral in the natural world, we will find that belief exquisitely and continually reflected in the shifting web of stories.

We'll probably never thoroughly understand what happened in Littleton last April. We can't just blame the parents, who apparently tried valiantly to connect with their kids. We can't wholly blame media violence, or guns, or any one aspect of our culture. But we can recognize the vast creative talent we can yet apply, individually and collectively, in exalting kindness and reverence. By looking carefully at the stories we live and share, we might create a vision of ourselves to instill hope in the Columbine generation. It's time. Colorado's flower will soon be blooming spectacularly again, and the high meadows expect miracles.