

## Living Without Television

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Reprinted from *Christian News*, March 20, 2006

Over 10 years ago, my wife and I decided to out TV from our lives. We are not television snobs, far from teetotalers, and believe that many aspects of life can be enjoyed in moderation. But television had become something of a negative for us, and we wondered what our lives would be like if we tried giving it up for a short period and then see what happened. We did, choosing the period of Lent in 1995, and that short period continues to this day.

I rank our disposing of the national pacifier among our most important joint decisions, right up there with deciding to get married or where to raise our children.

Our problems with television would be familiar for many. Watching the tube was time consuming, taking us away from other activities. We knew we'd receive much more long-term benefit, in terms of living a fuller life, from reading books, being engaged with others socially, and bonding with our kids. Also, we found it quite controlling. We'd catch ourselves being interested in television characters who in real life we would consider morons. While there was often programming we found worthwhile — movies on American Movie Classics and the occasional Letterman monologue, for instance — such programming was rare.

But we'd still watch.

I remembered an incident when I lived in an apartment complex in San Antonio. Walking from the parking lot to our apartment involved passing over 20 identical living rooms, and one evening, after taking out the garbage during one of Clinton's televised addresses, I noticed that every one of these living rooms had the president's happy mug on a television screen. Everyone. Having read Orwell in a high school English class — something that was common before the federalization of public education — I found this development appalling. Was this Texas or Oceana?

Also, our decision to out TV came from wanting to make a conscious choice not to live out lives watching other people live. Life is vicarious enough. Why add to it?

So I called our cable company and asked to have our service disconnected. The cable lady thought I was joking. She then reacted as though we were on life support and asking to have the oxygen tube removed. "Darlin'," she said, "you can't live life without TV."

Nonetheless, we sold our 19-inch television and put the proceeds toward a 13-inch combination TV/VCR that we kept in a closet. (This has since been replaced with a similar TV/DVD player combo.) While we watch occasional movies and other offerings available on DVDs, we often watch television when staying in hotel rooms or relatives' houses, events that occur two or three times a year. Nonetheless, over the last decade, we have been oblivious to several popular (or notorious) shows that have since come and gone. I have never seen a reality show (because these came about after we quit television), and only recently figured out what Bill O'Reilly looked like. My son was 6 years old when he realized that television had uses that didn't involve removable media.

This arrangement allows us to use television on our terms- We use it. It doesn't use us. But that cable lady had a point. She knew that we were consigning ourselves to a life of not getting the conversation at many dinner parties or of cutting away from a common bond that connects many people in society.

She was also right given the pervasiveness of television in the public square. They

are in bathrooms, restaurants, cars, sporting events, waiting rooms, airplanes, barber shops, and even Wal-Mart's. I don't know if they are in some churches, but I wouldn't be surprised, given how many modern churches have taken on the appearance of television studios. No one escapes television completely.

And she was right in terms of public discussion. The small talk at most social gatherings center on what people are currently watching. (Hint: If you ever want some bore to leave you alone at a party, simply tell him you don't watch TV.) My college students often support classroom arguments by referencing something they saw on CNN or the History Channel.

This is a particular area in which television's costs are great. Becoming informed takes some work. This traditionally involved reading books, newspapers, and magazines to develop opinions about what you believed (or didn't). Unfortunately, some of the most uninformed people I meet each day receive their news solely from television, which reduces complex social problems into emotional, highly manipulative one- or two-minute segments.

And these people vote.

The Framers of the Constitution created a decentralized republic, and explicitly not a democracy, because they knew that the latter tended toward centralization and tyranny. Even Jefferson believed that the small role actual voting would play in the new country would only be tolerable with an educated electorate. Not only would he hate television, he'd despair over a culture that promotes democracy and television's goods that must be universally available. What does it mean for freedom when so many voters are only informed to the extent possible through CNN and Fox News?

To take one example, consider some recent poll data. Forty-seven per cent of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein helped plan 9/11 and 44 per cent believed that the hijackers were Iraqi; 61 per cent thought that Saddam had been a serious threat to the U.S., and 76 per cent said the Iraqis are now better off. None of this is true, but it is understandable when so many in the electorate depend on television to be informed.

Don't think that the political class does not appreciate this development, because voters — whom the political class ostensibly serves — are much easier to manipulate when they develop opinions from what they see on TV. No wonder the federal government plans to spend billions of dollars subsidizing the transfer from analog transmissions to digital ones. Digital television has become the latest civil right, and a convenient one for holders of political power.

We chuckle when we hear friends rail against typical television fare, because we used to do that. The same people often complain about there not being enough hours in the day to accomplish all that they want. We chuckle at that too. But when we suggest dropping the one or two hours each day spent in front of the tube, we're the ones to get chuckled at. For many, going without television really is like going without oxygen.

My graceful wife gave up the tube easily. Not me. I remember doing things that my dad does when he gives up smoking. (My dad quits smoking several times a year. It's his hobby.) I'd become irritable and my mind would be on the corner of our house where that magnetic box used to be, sort of like how my dad thinks about the drawers where he stores his Terryton's. Over time, however, that corner became smaller in my mind as the benefits that came from dropping television grew.

For me, the benefits are much greater than simply being more productive during the

day, although that certainly is a plus. On many weeknights, my 5-year-old daughter and I play board games and go for walks. After she goes to bed, my 9-year-old son reads books while my wife and I sit down and engage in an activity called "talking." I think our family is closer than it would otherwise be, although I can never know for sure. I am sure our kids are less aware of the material world than their television-watching peers — and they seem more innocent. Surely this has something to do with the fact that they are not exposed, on a daily basis; to sex as a mere consumption good or to the sports-worshipping culture that pervades much television.

So every Lent, which begins next month, I remember that time in 1995 when my family decided to enter through the narrow gate that brought us into a world without television. Giving up pacifiers is never easy. In our case, it was important for our living a more purposeful and happy life.

Note: Also more time for the Lives of the Saints, for church, for prayer.