

The Triviality of Modern Life

John F Schumaker writes...

- 1 It is obvious when we survey the state of modern life that we are constantly preoccupied with the insignificant. Modern life is first obsessed with triviality, followed closely by superficiality and mindless distraction. Vanity looks great, pettiness is powering ahead, along with passivity and indifference. Ego is running wild. Curiosity was lost, wisdom was scratched and critical thought had to be put down. Attention span continues to shorten and no-one is betting on survival. 5
- 2 It wasn't supposed to be this way. Half a century ago, humanistic thinkers were expecting an awakening that would usher in a golden age of enlightened living - a new social order of raised consciousness, depth of purpose and ethical refinement. This vision was the opposite of our society of **blinker** narcissists and materialists. By the 21st century, we were supposed to be the 'people of tomorrow'. We would be driven toward authenticity, social equality and the welfare of coming generations. We would revere nature, realize the unimportance of material things and hold a healthy scepticism about technology and science. And we would be united to meet our 'higher needs'. 10
- 3 One of the most famous concepts in the history of psychology is Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs', often illustrated by a pyramid. This concept was inspired by a faith in innate positive human potential. Maslow claimed that once human beings meet their lower-level material needs, they naturally switch attention to higher-level needs (intellectual, spiritual, social, existential) and fulfillment. In moving up the pyramid, we **channel** ourselves toward wisdom, beauty, truth, love, gratitude and respect for life. Instead of a society that catered to and maintained the lowest common denominator, Maslow imagined one that prospered as it cultivated mature and enlightened individuals who aspired to reach the best of their potential. 15
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- 4 But something happened along the way. The pyramid collapsed. Human potential took a back seat to economic potential and enlightenment gave way to self-absorption on a spectacular scale. Consumer culture, which operates on the principle that triviality is more profitable than substance, has made people incomplete, shallow and dehumanized. Materialism continues to gain ground, even in the face of an impending eco-apocalypse. Everyone and everything else is inconsequential in our pursuit of hyper-consumerism as the goal of life. 25
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- 5 The average citizen is an empty tract through which gadgets can pass quickly, largely undigested, so there is always space for more. Often, the meaningful and meaningless can easily get reversed. The caption under a recent ad for men's underwear read: 'I've got something that's good for your body, mind and soul.' Such fashion statements have become an indicator of literacy; brand names foster pride and celebrity babble becomes compelling. 35
- 6 Even something as serious as religion has not been spared from this triviality. Once a potent commander of attention and allegiance, God has been tamed into a sort of heavenly lapdog who fetches our wishes for worldly success. Nothing is so great that it can't be reconceived or rephrased in order to change it into something insubstantial, non-threatening or – best of all – entertaining. 40

- 7 The age of trivialization has left its mark on marriage, family and love. In a recent AC Nielsen survey, when asked to choose between spending time with their fathers and watching television, 54 per cent of American 4-6 year-olds chose television. The same study reported that American parents spend an average of 3.5 minutes per week in 'meaningful conversation' with their children, while the children themselves watch 28 hours of television a week. To which we can add cellphones, computer games and other techno-toys that are inducing a state of digital autism in our young people. 45
- 8 Some great humanists assumed that we are ethical creatures by nature and that we'll do the right thing when necessary – we will transcend materialism given the freedom to do so. That seems far-fetched given the ethical coma in which we now find ourselves. Yet the ultimate test is whether or not we can do the right thing by the planet and for future generations. Can a highly trivialized culture, **marooned** between fact and fiction, dizzy with distraction and denial, elevate its values and priorities to respond effectively to the multiple planetary emergencies looming? 50
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- 9 On one hand, it doesn't appear to be happening because ethics and politics have never sat well together. When 'citizens' changed into 'consumers', political life became an exercise in keeping the customer happy. The imperfect democracies we have today have never been tested with planetary issues like global warming and climate change, which demand radical and unsettling solutions. In the race against the clock, politicians appear almost comical as they try not to disturb the trivial pursuits propping up our dangerously obsolete socio-economic system. 60
- 10 However, it is clear that global **calamity** is forcing us to reexamine our priorities and **muster** up our human capacity to do what is right. It is up to ethically driven individuals and groups to race ahead of the political class. There is an urgent need to promote 'global consciousness' – a worldview with a high awareness of the inter-relatedness and sacredness of all living things. Such a universality of mind can lead not only to intellectual illumination, but also to heightened moral sensibilities, compassion and greater communal responsibility. 65
- 11 Behind the scenes some noteworthy organizations are already working toward this goal, including the World Commission on Global Consciousness and Spirituality, whose members are Nobel laureates, culture theorists, futurists and spiritual leaders like the Dalai Lama. The group believes that positive human potential will unleash itself once we control and carve healthier channels for people's energies. According to their mission statement, the fate of humankind and the ecosystem lies in our ability over the next couple of decades to revise our modern trivial culture in order to foster global consciousness and create new, more 'mindful' political and economic models. 70
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- 12 The race to grasp what is significant is not over. The losers appear to be winning and the odds for a revolution in consciousness are no more than even. I hope there is an alternative other than to drown in our own shallowness. 80

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