

Speech, 2005 Kieser Award Recipient

Good afternoon, everybody.

Father Ellwood Kieser—who founded this institution and invented the Humanitas Awards—was once buttonholed by a young man on his way into one of these luncheon ceremonies. Bud didn't dress like a Priest and the man was full of questions—he wanted to know: "Are you a real Priest? How do you live?"

Bud Kieser was in a hurry. He said "Well it comes down to poverty—we try to live simply, not get attached to things—and chastity—we don't focus our love on one person, we try to be open to whoever needs us most. That's it—basically."

Young guy said "That's interesting. I'd like to think about that." Bud Kieser gave him his card, thinking maybe he'd met someone ready to commit to the Priestly life.

After lunch, the guy turned up at Bud's table. He was one of the waiters. He said "I've been thinking about what you said, Father. If this is the poverty I'd like to look at the chastity."

I've been asked to say a few words about the Humanitas Award and what it means. Father Kieser wrote that "The Humanitas luncheon speeches are the most literate, and the energy field generated is so strong and upbeat that everybody goes away glad to be alive and proud to be human. In a very real sense these luncheons have become humanistic liturgies, celebrations of the transcendent beauty present in the most mundane of human creations."

As you can see there's not going to be much of that kind of thing here today. Bud Kieser set out to change television. When it was called a great wasteland. Here and there flowers poked through the dirt and waste of the desert, and it was Bud Kieser's genius to see them, to seek them out and throw water on them.

The Humanitas Awards.

They are unique. Kieser was a genius.

Other awards—the SAG Awards, the Directors Guild Awards, the Writers Guild Awards, the Producers Awards—Awards for this, Awards for that, Awards for worldly success and achievement—and they all have only symbolic value. The Oscar statuette is worth 80 bucks wholesale.

The Humanitas is for altruism, for the highest and most morally principled achievement, and it's a shitload of money. That was Bud Kieser's genius. Change the world. Pay them to be good.

Of course the Oscar carries with it side effects, documented in a study in the New England Journal of Medicine. These doctors studying the statistics discovered that on average actors and directors who win Oscars live four years longer than those who are only nominated. Nobody knows why.

This does not apply to Hollywood screenwriters. Writers get no added years for winning. So perhaps it's only fitting that Humanitas money goes to writers, those who kick the whole thing off. Without whom nobody goes to work.

Bud Kieser's vision was this:

"A fulfilled person is an open, aware, free, creative and loving center of life and activity. We are not born fulfilled persons. We become fulfilled persons through a long and arduous process of humanization. This involves a search for the meaning of life."

He asked himself how television, this noisy furniture that is constantly on, in every home, 24/7 yammering in our ear, the public voice in the private ear and eye, that never blinks and never shuts up—how television could facilitate this search for the meaning of life. He wrote "Good television comedies and drama compress reality and distill human life so as to reveal its meaning. They throw sparks of light into the dark corners of our minds, helping us come up with our own answers to those problems we all struggle with late at night."

Since almost all of television is written by less than two thousand people, few preachers, politicians or educators have the potential moral influence these writers have. They do not necessarily decide what it is they get to write, but those writers still imbue the airwaves with their attitudes and feelings, their moral values.

What is entertainment? Is it only an escape—opium to numb the mind? We don't think so. Those entertainments that stand the test of time, the movies and television that go on selling DVDs year after year give something more—enrichment and substance. Bud spoke of two words defining entertainment: delight and enjoyment.

TV delights when it throws light into the darkness that surrounds us, helping to see who we are and what we're supposed to be doing with these lives of ours. It gives enjoyment when it feeds and stretches minds, frees imaginations to take a romp. Stirs hearts with challenge, and warms with compassion.

That was Bud Kieser's ideal of the moral values of television, of the flowering of the wasteland. It was his way of helping God. For this secular thinker it is a way of affirming our confidence and faith in liberal democratic society. Excuse me, I don't mean to exclude Republicans—I mean a free and open and collaborative nation joined in the practice of democratic rule, and dedicated to freedom of thought, speech, and religion.

Now—we have recently had a wardrobe malfunction that threatens to undermine the republic and unravel the moral fabric of society. Congress is making bullying noises about keeping the American home clean and pure. They are trying to expunge sex, dirty words and bad news from television. To put it all, every bad thing, out of sight, no bloody road accidents, no actors dancing in fountains with prostitutes, no bad stuff at all—in an effort to protect our children. But this is impossible. Children are going to be confronted with all kinds of language and happenstances—bad people and terrible things we can't anticipate. Reality bites, and you can't prevent or deny it. To try to make a world in which children grow up with the idea that there is no unpleasantness, no pain, no fear, no anger and no evil or immorality is to leave them defenseless.

The only way we can protect our children is to teach them to recognize, to know and to discriminate between evil and mischief, to know how to react and how to think. To teach them how to deal with

problems when they meet them. To be aware and alert and knowledgeable and smart and discriminating.

Bud Kieser thought that was what television should do. Not deny reality but show us how to deal with it.

The Humanitas was Bud Kieser's legacy to nudge us to keep eyes and minds open, to help steer a way through tough times. There are those in high places who view this as opening the door to filth and degradation and moral decay. The voices of denial. And they use money as the stick, as Humanitas uses money as the carrot. Big fines for four letter words, and threats to go further than just the seven forbidden words.

But I believe the threat of government censorship is not real. Both right and left are justly leery of going down that road.

But there is another kind of censorship that comes from catering to the broadest audience, from being afraid to offend any segment of that audience.

Liberal critics have raised the alarm over what they see as corporate censorship, the exclusion from theaters and TV of anything except what seems marketable and the elimination of anything that might offend anybody anywhere. But the danger of censorship in America is less from business or the religious right—or the self-righteous left—than to self-censorship by artists themselves, who simply give up. If we can't see a way to get our story told, what is the point of trying? I wonder how many fine, inspiring ideas in every walk of life are strangled in the womb of the imagination because there's no way seen past the gates of commerce?

With us here today are writers who are not deterred, who persist. They manage every year to make a few films and some television that satisfy both the lower appetite for thrills and excitement and at the same time provide the deeper satisfactions of art and truth for the viewers who are equipped to experience it.

To reach and touch the angel in the beast.

We need this from them as we need clean drinking water and safe roads, green parks and libraries; it is as important as the breath of democratic life. Somehow we need to keep alive in our hearts the vision of community, shared interests and understanding of our neighbors' needs, the sense of connection this fractionated society is losing.

Everything else is just working for wages.

It is the Humanitas Awards that reach out to those who try to invest their work with meaning and affirmation of life. And who keep on trying. And it's here today we recognize those who in this past year gave us their personal best, they who demonstrate to the world that show business has a heart and a soul. We gather here to thank them and applaud them and to tell them—don't spend it all in one place.

In the spirit of Bud Kieser, we thank them all.