

President, Writers Guild of America, West Humanitas Prize Luncheon

When I was a very small boy, I decided to find out one day if there was a God. I lived in a little town called Spring Valley, New York, a sleepy community full of trees, grass, cows, and hotels displaying signs, "Dietary Laws Obeyed—Strictly Kosher". This country village has now been encased in concrete and renamed the New York State Thruway, possibly as punishment for having raised me. But on the Saturday of my momentous decision, my parents had admonished me that a nice Jewish boy did not work on the Sabbath, which was all right with me because I didn't work any other day, either, being some six wise years of age. But then they told me that in God's eye, work included the carrying of a handkerchief in one's pocket. This didn't sound reasonable to me, but I was told if God says don't carry a handkerchief, don't argue with Him! Don't ask questions! Don't risk being struck down dead! On the Sabbath, never carry a handkerchief in your pocket. Amen.

Some of my young friends told me of other boys who had been struck down dead for this same infamous deed; but they were a little vague on names, dates, and places. Emboldened, I decided to risk my life and test the existence of the Lord. I stuffed a handkerchief in my pocket—way down in my pocket, if He was the Lord, He would know, if He didn't, He wasn't much of a Supreme Being—and I walked to the end of our driveway and out into the street, which I looked on as the Outside World, and held my breath.

I was very disappointed. There wasn't even a clap of thunder. I had been looking forward to being struck down dead instantly and telling my friends about it, although how I was going to manage that I never figured out. All that happened was that a car drove by and I got splashed with mud. I didn't even turn into a pillar of salt. This was a considerable letdown. But now I knew. There was no God.

In later years, I came to Hollywood and confirmed it. The word of God was on the radio every day, but He seemed to be soliciting funds. Later, when television arrived, the only change was that He needed more funds to pay for the cameras and the lights. It seemed to me that if God always needed money, He wasn't really a Supreme Being, He was more like my Uncle Max.

Well, this is all a long preamble to say I have recently found out I was wrong. There is Father Kieser, he is a man of God although he prefers to be known as Bud, and there is the Humanitas Prize, and it is awarded for humanizing achievement in television. Humanitas believes television can "affirm the dignity of the human person, probe the meaning of human life, and liberate, enrich, and unify the human family." In the present state of television, if this isn't a task for God, I don't know what is.

What has always impressed me most is the way Humanitas goes about it. Not by threatening in the name of the Lord to boycott any manufacturer who sponsors shows they don't like, which is the same as threatening to strike you dead if you carry a handkerchief on the Sabbath, but by rewarding the writers of the good programs beyond anyone else. The producers, directors, story editors, production companies and networks who produce the programs get a plaque. The writers get money.

There is a God.

I do not mean this facetiously. We all become aware, once we are no longer little boys, there is too much order in the Universe for it to have been planned by network executives. There has got to be Somebody higher than Freddie, as Freddie himself has recently found out. All of us should give some time, and some thought, to the principle that we have not been placed upon this earth merely to get ratings.

Only Humanitas and the Writers Guild of America seem to recognize that, in television, in the beginning was the Word. Creation begins at the typewriter. By affirming the dignity and importance and the conscience of the writers who "are shaping our culture, its tastes, lifestyle, and its values", Humanitas has made all of us who live by the pen aware of our capabilities and our responsibilities, and encouraged us to try a little harder, in a medium that must also entertain and create profits. Humanitas is applying its influence at the fulcrum, the writing, where its effect is multiplied.

The Moral Majority, as it is called, also seems to have a majority of the funds in this field, and too bad. Some of those funds directed to the Humanitas program would do much more real good. While I certainly agree with the Moral Majority's objective of improving television, I don't think that invoking the name of the Lord in a campaign against Procter & Gamble is what was meant by the Sermon on the Mount...even if it works. I much prefer the method used by Father Kieser and Humanitas: praise, encouragement, recognition, of the Story Tellers, the talented men and women whose ideas and words are helping to shape this generation and this country; encouragement for the good work they do in promoting humanity.

We all need encouragement. We are all of us six years old, walking, frightened, down that long driveway, waiting to learn if there is a God.