

## Our Lost Passion for Something Better

Remarks, Humanitas Prize Luncheon, Sheraton Universal Hotel,  
Universal City, CA

*My life in Television began at what I would call the first birth of the medium as we know it—1950—just before the transcontinental coaxial cable was laid and coast to coast Television broadcasts became possible. What a time that was! Live Television. Up at 8, off at 9. We worked hard, but the work was fun—and collegial. There was a kind of camaraderie and joy in the business of Television that we don't see a lot of anymore—and there is no way to overstate our aspirations for the medium of which we were a part. We held such high hopes for it.*

*I can't think of that time without remembering one particular moment: Ed Simmons and I were writing The Colgate Comedy Hour starring Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis—and as soon as that transcontinental coaxial cable was laid, we were scheduled to move to the West Coast to broadcast exclusively from there. The NBC comedy shows were going first—and we were throwing a farewell party for ourselves in Bud Yorkin's apartment. Present was Pat Weaver, head of the NBC network, Dean, Jerry—the four stage managers of the Colgate Comedy Hour, Bud Yorkin, Arthur Penn, John Rich and Jack Smight—and others. At midnight, we were all gathered around the piano, and together we wrote a parody of a well-known lyric to commemorate our move to California. And wouldn't you know I'm gonna sing it for you now?*

*When the transcontinental coaxial cable is laid, is laid,  
When the transcontinental coaxial cable is laid, we're made,  
There'll be no more gray kinescopes,  
We'll be there with our kinne-folks,  
You'll hear those Cucamonga jokes,  
Coming to you from Hollywood and Vine Street,  
We'll be on the run, to the land of sun, and  
swimming pools,  
The dramatic shows will be static shows if they stay,  
those fools,  
Horcharchonia! It's California!  
We'll ride the Super Chief,  
When the transcontinental coaxial cable is laid.*

*And so, coast to coast television was born. I believe the industry was born again and the landscape reshaped in the 1980s with the advent of cable and cable networks—HBO, Showtime, CNN, USA Network, Discovery, Lifetime, the History channel, the Sci-Fi channel, pay TV channels, etc., not to mention the fourth full-time network, Fox—followed by two would-be full-timers—UPN and Warner Bros.*

*Today, it seems to me, our industry is being born yet again with the conglomerizing that sees Disney's purchase of Cap Cities/ABC—Time Warner's planned buyout of Turner Broadcasting—*

*Westinghouse's acquisition of CBS—in addition to the sprawling family tree of intermarriages among Baby bells, computers, telecommunications, CD-ROMs, the Internet and many other electronic media.*

*Who knows if this new order of melting pots will yield the anticipated synergies—or whether, as many suspect, it will be one massive boondoggle for shareholders and the public. My concern is the very plausible scenario that we may soon have only three or four humongous, homogenous funnels through which all news, information and entertainment will pass—with little support for localism, diversity of programming, or robust free speech.*

*While I'm not predicting such a calamity, it's obvious that such is possible and I do wonder why this is not the subject of a national and very public discussion. Then again, who is left to conduct such a discussion when the rest of the media are themselves buyers, sellers, mergers or mergees?*

*I suspect it is up to the independent companies, and to we writers, producers, directors and actors—those of us who happen not to be caught up in the conglomerizing of the moment, to begin the discussion. The electronic media is, after all, fast becoming—if it has not become already—the nervous system for human consciousness. The combination of films, television, computers, CD-ROMs, theme parks which make use of all of the above—and the tidal wave of merchandising that flows from these ventures—have begun to dictate our social reality. Soon they will shape—or perhaps limit—our capacities, aspirations and imaginations.*

*If the past fifty years of television's influence on our culture holds any lessons, it is that tomorrow's electronic media is certain to shape not just our national life, but our very identities.*

*This sits well, I'm sure, with those executives in and out of television whose sole criteria for judging the progress of the medium is its growth as a business, measured in dollars alone. It will sit well with the programmers for whom the name of the game is "give me a hit Tuesday night at 8:30 p.m. and every other value be damned." And it will sit well with the TV titans who make the Nielsen ratings the sole arbiter of what is worthwhile—and live only to satisfy Wall Street with a profit statement this quarter larger than the last—and, again, every other value be damned.*

*These champions of the new conglomerizing electronic media would have us believe that a parade of progress, freedom and enlightenment is at hand. And indeed the new technologies will open up many dazzling, new, interactive and program possibilities for the individual. But given the bottom-line, short-term ethos that dominates our business culture, can the media develop the kind of socially, visionary leadership that was present at the first birth of television? In those years, they called themselves "broadcasters"—you don't hear that word now—and the term carried a sense of pride and professionalism—not to mention a distinct sense of responsibility to the viewing public.*

*Frank Stanton and Wiliam Paley did not emasculate their standards of journalism to hike the ratings. David Sarnoff's pride in the NBC Symphony Orchestra lead by Leopold Stakowski was not in its balance sheet. Fred Friendly and Edward R. Murrow could take risks, big risks, because they were driven not so much by ratings, as by their personal values and standards of journalism. The network executives in those years were not kneeling before the Niensens or cowering at every passing down-tick of their stock prices.*

*My wish for television, as we meet here today, is that it recover that early sense of constructive engagement with American culture and politics. My wish is for a new birth of socially visionary leadership.*

*It is tempting to think that this will emerge from the new technologies and delivery systems themselves. And while they will open up a great new range of possibilities, they will not necessarily help bring us together as a nation; heal the wounds of our troubled, cynical society; assist in the reduction of racial tensions, or help educate today's young people. Such needs have little to do with technology — and everything to do with the character, values and aspirations that we will bring to the shaping of that technology.*

*If television is indeed failing its promise to America, as our critics charge, it is because we in television are not living up to our full potential. The exceptions that prove that rule may be the rare and distinguished work Humanitas honors here today. But please don't think I'm here to scapegoat the rest of television. That is a cheap and easy way to evade the real problems that face us—and I leave that to Bob Dole and Senator Lieberman. Television gets the rap for so many problems if only because it is so visible, so ubiquitous. The fact is that America—which happens to include business, government, and nonprofits as well as television—is failing its promise.*

*Alexis de Tocqueville described over one hundred and fifty years ago what I believe to be our condition today:*

*“I confess,” he said, “I believe democratic society to have much less to fear from boldness than from paltriness of aim. What frightens me most is the danger that, amid all the constant trivial preoccupations of private life, ambition may lose both its force and its greatness...that human passions may grow gentler and at the same time baser, with the result that the progress of the body social may become daily quieter and less aspiring.”*

*De Tocqueville speaks to the contemporary American condition—and certainly to all of us in television. We do have “less to fear from boldness than from paltriness of aim.” The ambition that we all had for television at the beginning, almost fifty years ago, has lost “both its force and its greatness.” And our aims for television have certainly become “quieter and less aspiring.”*

*All this has happened while TV's influence on the culture has correspondingly grown. And yet it has responded to this development with a steadily shrinking ambition—a paltriness of aim.*

*This uninspired attitude—this fear of passionate, visionary leadership—is hardly limited to television. It can be found throughout the culture of business, of politics, of music—it can be found everywhere. The big questions are—How did we get here? And what do we do about it?*

*I believe that we in television got here when, starting many years ago and escalating over time, we began to subjugate our potential for creative leadership to the relentless reckoning of perceived public tastes whose fluctuations are measured minute by minute seven days a week!*

*Living and making decisions by the numbers has infected most other industries as well—and politics. The results are only too obvious. The touchstones of judgment are contrived numbers—not criteria that hold larger, more enduring meaning.*

*And so we live in a world dominated by numerical judgments. We define ourselves, our values and our aspirations by SAT scores, box office grosses, ratings, cost-benefit analysis, quarterly profits, bottom lines, and polls, polls, polls—all of which exert an iron grip on our sense of the possible, and on our very*

*identities. We have become a numbers-oriented culture that places its faith in what we can graph, chart or count, and is suspicious of the unquantifiable, the intuitive, the mysterious.*

*A culture that becomes a stranger to its own inner human needs—which are, for better or worse, unquantifiable, intuitive and mysterious—is a culture that has lost touch with the best of its humanity.*

*I'm referring to the invisible inner life of the human species—the fertile but neglected realm that is the wellspring for human creativity and morality; that portion of ourselves that impels us to create art and literature, and study ethics, philosophy and history; that part of our being that connects us to the earth and all living things—and gives rise to our sense of awe and wonder; and our longing for truth and beauty and a higher order of meaning. For want of a better term, one can call it the spirit-led, or spiritual, life of our species. Whatever we call it, we have long recognized its presence and accepted that it sets us apart.*

*And yet, as a student of the American psyche—which is the best way that I can sum up my forty-some years of involvement in television—at no time in my life can I remember our culture being so estranged from this essential part of itself. One can see it in the loss of faith in leaders and institutions—the cynicism, selfishness, and erosion of civility—and the hunger for connectedness that stalks our nation today.*

*Why, then, is it so hard to acknowledge this dimension? How do we begin to break down that wall that separates our higher personal ideals from the conduct of our professional and daily lives? And wouldn't it be extraordinary if we in television, with our enormous impact on the culture, could take the lead in that? Just as your honorees today have taken the lead from Father Kieser and the work of earlier Humanitas Award winners.*

*Such leadership is not conferred on any of us; it originates from inside. Yet heeding that small voice of conscience can be as transforming as yeast: a tiny bit of something that subtly changes everything else, making it rise and expand to higher levels.*

*In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, as the Spanish were first exploring California, the maps of the day depicted California as an island. Lots of firsthand witnesses came back and told Spanish authorities the truth—that California was part of a larger land mass, and was not an island. But no matter. People continued to believe the old maps. And so, relying on the maps, Spanish missionaries actually hauled their boats over the Sierra Nevadas expecting to find water on the other side. Instead they found...the deserts of Nevada. It took decades for people to incorporate the obvious into their internal "mental maps".*

*From the comfortable hindsight of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, such mass gullibility seems laughable. But can we really be so sure that the mental maps inside our heads are so much more accurate; that with our reliance on focus groups and research and ratings, we are not in fact the prisoners of our own obsolete mental categories; that as we subjugate the instincts that flow from our inner selves to the numbers-oriented mental maps we contrive, we may be misdirecting our energies in some monumentally inappropriate ways?*

*Shouldn't we be drawing up some new mental maps for the 1990s and beyond—maps that begin to sketch out the neglected landmarks of the lost continent of the human spirit? The great impresarios of the past didn't rely on research and focus groups—they went with their gut. Which is to say they put a premium on themselves—on the talent and the instinct and the spirit with which they were endowed.*

*I recognize that for the most part, in this company, I've been preaching to the choir—and I thank you for that opportunity. But let's all work to get the word out.*

*We here know that the Great American Viewing Audience will be far better served the day we all decide to drop the numbers-driven mental maps that lay claim to us now—in favor of developing those scripts, those program ideas that flow solely from our tastes and sensibilities, from our capacities for awe and wonder and mystery—from our humanity and compassion—and from that voice within us that may be saying even now—“this is right, this is right”.*