

How Do Our Kids Get So Caught Up In Consumerism?

by Brian Swimme

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In the Merck Family Fund's Yearning for Balance national survey, 86 percent of people agreed or strongly agreed that "today's youth are too focused on buying and consuming things." This is a touchstone issue for children and the future. The following book excerpt deals with how children today discover what it means to be human.

If, in order to become fully human, we truly do need to ponder the universe and discover our place in nature, if this three-hundred-thousand-year tradition is rooted in the requirements of our genetic makeup, then we will find our way to ideas concerning the proper human role in the universe one way or another. And if the institutions of education and religion have, for whatever well-defended reasons, decided to abdicate that role, someone, somewhere is going to step forward and provide it.

So where are we initiated into the story of the universe? To answer we need to reflect on what our children

experience over and over again each night, the way those children in the past gathered in the caves and

listened to the chant of the elders. If we think in terms of pure quantities of time the answer is immediate: the

cave has been replaced by the television room and the chant by the advertisement.

One might think that the television show has replaced the chant, but at the core of each show, driving the

action and determining whether or not the show will survive the season, is the advertisement. That is the

essential message that will be there night after night and season after season. Bonanza, Cheers, and

Cosby have come and gone, but the advertisement endures.

What effect does this have on our children? Before entering first grade science class, and before entering,

in any real way, into our religious ceremonies, a child will have soaked in 30,000 advertisements. The time

our teenagers spend absorbing ads is more than their total stay in high school. None of us feels

very good

about this, but for the most part we just ignore it. It's background noise. It's just there, part of what's going

on. We learned to accept it so long ago that we hardly ever think about it anymore.

But imagine how different we would feel if we heard about a country that programmed its citizenry with

religious dogmas in such a manner. In fact, it was just such accounts concerning the Soviet Union that

outraged us for decades, the thought that they would take young children and subject them to brainwashing

in Soviet lies, removing their natural feelings for their parents or for God or for the truth of history, and

replacing these with assumptions necessary for their domination.

Immersed in the religion of consumerism, we are unable to see such comparisons. We repeat to

ourselves soothing cliches, such as the obvious fact that television ads are not put on by any political

dictatorship. We tell ourselves that ads are simply the efforts of corporations to get us interested in their

various products.

And it's true, of course, that the advertisers are not bad persons with evil designs. They're just doing their

jobs. On the other hand, we can also say that their primary concern is not the well-being of our children. Why

should it be? Their objective is to create ads that get the television viewers interested in products. But

already we can see that this is a less-than-desirable situation. After all, we demand that teachers, for

example, have our children's best interests in mind, because teachers shape our children when they are

young and vulnerable. To hand over so much of our children's lives to people who obviously do not have their

well-being foremost in mind is, at the very least, questionable.

But at a deeper level, we need to confront the power of the advertiser to promulgate a worldview, a

minicosmology based on dissatisfaction and craving. An ad-industry cliché captures the view succinctly: "An

ad's job is to make them unhappy with what they have."

We rarely think of ads being shaped by explicit worldviews, but that is precisely why they are so effective.

The last thing we want to think about when we're lying on the couch relaxing is the philosophy behind the ad.

So we soak it all up, and it sinks down deep into our psyche. Now, if this takes place in the adult soul,

imagine how much more damage is done to the psyches of our children, who have none of our protective

cynicism and take in the ad's message as if it were coming from a trusted parent or teacher.

The corporate advertising world, of course, offers lucrative salaries, and that financial draw attracts our

highest IQs and our best artistic talent, not to mention any sports hero or movie star they want to buy.

Combining brain power and social status with sophisticated electronic graphics and penetrating psychological techniques, these teams of highly trained adults descend upon children not yet in school, with

the simple goal to create in them--and in the rest of us--a dissatisfaction with their lives and a craving for yet

another consumer product. It's hard to imagine any child having the capacities necessary to survive such a

lopsided battle, especially when it's fought ten thousand times a year, with no cultural bulwark capable of

keeping out the forces of consumerism. Could even one child in the whole world endure that onslaught and

come out intact? It's extremely doubtful. Put it all together, and it's no great mystery that consumerism has

become the dominant faith in every corner of the planet today.

It's not just that our children are easy prey. It's not just that the rushing river of advertisements determines

the sorts of shoes and clothes and toys and games and sugar cereals that they must have. It's not just that

they are left with a pervasive unhappiness whenever they cannot have such commodities, an unhappiness

that in many cases leads to aggression and violence of the worst kind in order to obtain what their parents

will not or cannot give them. All of this is of great concern, but the central point I wish to focus on here is that

they are initiated into a particular view of the world.

Advertisements are where our children receive their cosmology, their basic grasp of the world's meaning,

which amounts to their primary "faith," though they don't recognize it as such. Perhaps the more recalcitrant

children will view upwards of a hundred thousand ads before they cave in and accept consumerism's basic

worldview. But eventually they all get the message. It's a simple cosmology, told to great effect and delivered

a billion times a day, not only to Americans, but to nearly everyone on the planet. Its message: human

beings exist to work at jobs, to earn money, to buy stuff. The image of the ideal person put forth by the ad is

not Jesus or Socrates. Forget all about Rachel Carson or Martin Luther King Jr., with all their suffering and

love and wisdom. In the propaganda world of the ad, the ideal people--the fully human humans--are relaxed

and carefree, drinking Pepsis around a pool, unencumbered by powerful ideas concerning the nature of

goodness, undisturbed by visions of suffering that could inspire a commitment to justice. None of that ever

appears. In the religion of the ad, the task of civilization is much simpler. The ultimate meaning behind

human existence is getting all this stuff. That's paradise. And the meaning of the earth? To provide the raw

materials from which to manufacture consumer stuff.

I have mentioned only television here, but of course TV is just one part of the program. We need to

remember roadside billboards, the backs of cereal boxes, the fifty thousand magazines crammed with

glossy sales pitches, the lunch-boxes wrapped with toy advertisements, the trillion radio commercials, the

come-ons piped into video programs, the seductions pouring into the telephone receiver when we're put on

hold, the corporate logos stitched into our clothes and on and on. Literally everywhere on Earth, advertising

continues toward its goal of becoming omnipresent, even entering space on the surfaces of our satellites.

If those bizarre cults we read about in the papers used even one-tenth of 1 percent of the dazzling deceit of

our advertisers, the cult leaders would be hounded by the U.S. justice department and thrown in jail

straightaway. But in American and European and Japanese society, and increasingly everywhere else, we

are so blinded by the all-encompassing propaganda of the ads that we never think to confront the

advertisers and demand they cease. On the contrary, as if cult members ourselves, we pay them lucrative

salaries and hand over our children in the bargain.

If we do come to an awareness of the way in which the advertisement is shaping our children, and if we

find this unacceptable, we are left with the task of inventing new ways of introducing our children--and

everyone else--to the universe. Teaching the new cosmology, grounded in our contemporary understanding

of the universe and nourished by our more ancient spiritual convictions concerning its meaning, is a first

step out of the religion of consumerism and into a way of life based upon the conviction that we live within a

sacred universe.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

--Margaret Mead