
CREATING HEALTH FROM BELOW?

EXPOSING AND RESISTING THE POWER OF MEDIA CULTURE OVER PUBLIC HEALTH

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A few days ago, my three-year-old daughter happened to glimpse a picture of a glowing young woman in blue gown and long white gloves. It was Cinderella, all dressed up for the ball. And though my daughter didn't know the woman's name—has never read the story or seen the Disney movie—she pointed and pleaded, “Can I dress up like *her*?” What silliness, I thought, as we left home for the playground. But not before I grabbed my mesh back hat, making sure its bill was still bent just as retired tennis star Andy Roddick would don it.

Do we ever get over this stuff?

Maybe it's more serious than we tend to think. In his splendid essay, “Somehow Form a Family,” Tony Earley recalls growing up in front of the television.¹ It was 1970. Earley and his sister Shelly were in elementary school when their parents bought a new color TV, replacing their old black-and-white set. Everything changed. In the morning and after school and in the evening, Earley and Shelly watched shows like *Hee-Haw*, *All in the Family*, *Bonanza*, *Hawaii Five-O*, and *The Beverly Hillbillies*. They watched incessantly. Their father moved out. Their mother stopped taking them to church.

As Earley and Shelly grew, TV reality blended with the rest of life. “Shelly had a crush on Bobby Brady; I had a crush on Jan. Jan had braces, I had braces. Jan had glasses, I had glasses.[...]I lay in bed at night and imagined being married to Jan Brady but having an affair with Marsha. I wondered how we would tell Jan, what Marsha and I would do then, where we would go. Greg Brady beat me up. I shook his hand and told him I deserved it. Alice refused to speak to me.”²

Their father moved back in. By high school, this fantasy realm had devoured even more of their existence.

In those days Shelly and I watched *Guiding Light* when we got home from school. It was our soap. I remember that Ed Bauer's beautiful wife Rita left him because he was boring. Shelly said I reminded her of Ed Bauer. She wore her hair like Farrah Fawcett Majors on *Charlie's Angles*. After *Guiding Light* I changed the channel and watched *Star Trek*. I could not stay awake in school. I went to sleep during homeroom. During the day I woke up only long enough to change classes and eat lunch. I watched *Star Trek* when I got home as if it were beamed to our house by God.³

His parents worried that he had narcolepsy. But what was really happening, it seems, is that Earley's identity was being deeply unsettled by the world of TV. This teenage kid in smalltown North Carolina

¹ Tony Earley, “Somehow Form a Family,” in *Somehow Form a Family: Stories That Are Mostly True* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2001).

See <http://www.asfa.k12.al.us/ourpages/auto/2013/8/22/53651666/Somehow%20Form%20a%20Family.pdf>.

² *Ibid.*, 9-10.

³ *Ibid.*, 13.

was suddenly saying things like, “Pa, when we get back to the Ponderosa, do you want me to round up those steers on the lower forty?”⁴ How fluid the borders between fictional characters and our selves.

Tragedy came, but Earley conveys it in a tone mundane, gauging these shifts by what was on the tube: “Shelly died on Christmas Eve morning when I was a freshman in college. She had wrecked mama’s car. That night I stayed up late and watched the Pope deliver the Christmas mass from the Vatican. There was nothing else on. Daddy moved out again.”⁵ A few years later, after his father had moved back in, Earley would visit his parents each Thursday night. They’d watch *The Cosby Show*, *Family Ties*, *Cheers*, and other shows. Their aging Zenith “began slowly dying. Its picture narrowed into a greenly tinted slit. It stared like a diseased eye into the living room.”⁶

Then came work as a newspaper reporter, then graduate school, and Earley rekindled his friendship with *Guiding Light*. “I had known Ed Bauer longer than I had known all but a few of my friends. It pleased me to see him in Springfield every afternoon, trying to do good. I watched *The Andy Griffith Show* twice a day[....]I watched the Gulf War from a stool in a bar.”⁷

Eventually I married a woman who grew up in a family that watched television only on special occasions[....]My wife was a student in a seminary. She did not want to meet Ed Bauer, nor could I explain, without sounding pathetic, why Ed Bauer was important to me. The first winter we were married I watched the winter Olympics huddled beneath a blanket in the frigid basement of the house we had rented.[...]I contemplated jumping from a bridge into the Ohio River. My wife asked the seminary community to pray for me. Ann B. Davis, who played Alice on *The Brady Bunch* was a member of that community. One day I saw her in the cafeteria at school.⁸

It is a strange and wondrous thing to encounter film or TV stars bereft of the protections of an intervening screen. How should one react? That day in the cafeteria, Earley didn’t talk to Davis, didn’t dare approach her. Instead, spying on her as she ate, he hoped she was among those who prayed for him. But there was much he *wanted* to tell her.

I wanted to tell her that I grew up in a split-level ranch-style house outside a small town that could have been named Springfield, but that something had gone wrong inside it. I wanted to tell her that years ago Alice had been important to me, that my sister and I had looked to Alice for something we could not name, and had at least seen a picture of what love looked like. I wanted to tell her that no one in my family ever raised their voice while the television was on, that late at night even a bad television show could keep me from hearing the silence inside my own heart. I wanted to tell her that Ed Bauer and I were still alive, that both of us had always wanted to do what was right.[...]I wanted her to *be* Alice. I wanted her to smile as if she loved me. I wanted her to say, “Buck up, kiddo, everything’s going to be all right.” And what I’m trying to tell you now is this: I grew up in a split-level ranch-style house outside a town that could have been anywhere. I grew up in front of a television. I would have believed her.⁹

I have drawn at such shameless length on Earley’s essay because it communicates something that is better expressed personally than how I’ll say it now: our practices and language—indeed, our very selves—are riddled with depictions. As critical theorist Douglas Kellner observes, we tend to construct much of our identities from the models presented to us by popular media, especially the internet, TV,

⁴ Ibid., 14.

⁵ Ibid., 14-15.

⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 16-17.

⁹ Ibid., 17-18.

film, music, works of fiction, and magazines.¹⁰ Through the norms embedded in its images, sounds, and messages, our media culture invests us with a potent sense of what it is to be, say, pretty or dressed up (Cinderella), cool (Andy Roddick), good (Ed Bauer), or loving (Alice). As bioethicist Carl Elliott puts it, “many Americans today learn who they want to be not by listening to a Methodist minister or a civics teacher but by watching advertisements for The Gap.”¹¹

Enter health. Like numerous other aspects of our identity, what it is to be healthy is derived, in part, from popular media. For many of us, being healthy—or helping others achieve health—is an important part of who we are. Furthermore, on a societal level, public health is a significant goal for our government and for hosts of private organizations—a significant feature, we might say, of our collective identity. But on which media sources are our conceptions of “health” and “public health” modeled? For decades, of course, we’ve had our fill of health mags and drug ads, fitness gurus and doctor dramas on the tube. And their influence has been vast, to say the least. But which other media have shaped our ideas of “health”?

Taking its cue from that question, this special issue of *Catalyst* considers some popular and compelling portrayals of health—or the pursuit of health—in fiction, non-fiction, and film. As byproducts of these media, must our notions of “health” and “public health” serve dominant interests? That is, are we capable of rejecting those notions or even replacing them with ideas that do not kneel to economic, political, or religious powers? Furthermore, can media culture be co-opted as a tool of resistance, enabling persons with limited power to advance their own conceptions of “health” as they aspire to what might be called “health from below”? These are the questions engaged by the papers collected here.

My contribution to this issue attempts to expose the power that a particular work of non-fiction wields over health and public health. I offer a close reading of *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Tracy Kidder’s wildly popular account of the first two decades of Dr. Paul Farmer’s health-related work in Haiti and elsewhere. *Mountains* portrays Farmer as a Christ-like figure, I argue. In doing so, Kidder’s book bolsters a dominant doctrine that—by analogy with the Christian belief that salvation comes “from above”—might be called “health from above.” According to that rampant creed, wealthy and powerful individuals, organizations, institutions, and governments possess the sole prerogative to define and manage “health” for everyone on the planet. By consigning Farmer’s Haitian colleagues and patients largely to an anonymous, background status, *Mountains* prevents us from wondering what *indigenous* ideas and systems of health might look like, for Haitians and hundreds of millions of others worldwide, were they less constrained by the reigning myopia of health from above. I conclude by wondering whether unique ideas and systems of health could still emerge from disadvantaged persons—whether “health from below” remains possible, that is—in a media-saturated world.

When striking out into the terrain of U.S. healthcare—puzzled, as it is, with swift rivers and mindless heights—unschooled in the native dialect, and equipped with a map that is patchy at best, many of us are weak or powerless. This is true especially for tens of millions of uninsured and underinsured persons in our society. With their plight in mind, David Rochefort considers fictional portrayals of our healthcare “system.” He offers a detailed analysis of Lionel Shriver’s *So Much for That* (2010) and Bebe Moore Campbell’s *72 Hour Hold* (2004), arguing that these novels reify the system by presenting it as a character among other characters that displays consistent motivations, values, and patterns of behavior. In these novels, the system is nemesis, its “personality” defining “the source of disadvantage and oppression for those subject to its whims, as well as the challenges to be overcome by any meaningful process of reform,” Rochefort writes. Fortunately, in these texts, many of those victimized by the system also seek to resist it, raising a voice of protest “from below” against its hegemony.

Like Rochefort, Rob DeLeo is concerned with the relationship between health and democracy, but DeLeo turns in a different direction to consider the persistent threat of a virulent epidemic. He attends to

¹⁰ Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Post-modern* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹¹ Carl Elliott, *Better than Well: American Medicine Meets the American Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002), 127.

three biothriller films—*Outbreak* (1995), *Fatal Contact: Bird Flu in America* (2006), and *Contagion* (2011)—asking whether they effectively empower citizens by educating us about the rare and dangerous diseases they depict, entertaining us, and encouraging us to be engaged in the process of mitigating outbreaks. None of these films fully realizes the empowerment ideal, DeLeo observes. However, he finds much to be commended in these films, concluding optimistically that even an industry as powerful as Hollywood can accomplish work “from below”—in this case, by helping a democratic body to be “healthy” or well-functioning in its readiness for epidemics. To that end, DeLeo has gone below and beyond, providing a practical Viewer’s Guide to be used in classrooms and by community groups as they screen and discuss these films.

I join David Rochefort and Rob DeLeo to express thanks for the excellent, anonymous reviews we received. To all of us, it was obvious that our colleagues wrestled graciously and at length with our ideas. We’re grateful for their care.

References

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