

“The Shocker”

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I was standing in line at a supermarket last August when a headline on a rather credible news source caught my attention.

“Thousand Pound Baby Eats Own Mother”

I was intrigued. I immediately picked up the paper and began rifling through the pages trying to find some kind of explanation.

At that moment, I was appalled that the local news stations hadn't made the public aware of such a landmark event. What did the news come to? I mean, come on, babies eating moms? That's important stuff.

When I finally came across the article, I have to admit that I was just a little bit disappointed, only because lying in front of me was a giant, obviously computer generated, picture of a humongous child wearing an oversize bib, toting a caption that read, “I don't want string beans. I want you for dinner.”

I immediately threw down the worthless piece of news – to the conveyor belt, of course, well cause it had this really interesting looking article about J-Lo and Ben Affleck that I just had to read – and as I paid the really cute checkout boy, I thought to myself, “You know, who writes this stuff and what are they trying to prove or even say?”

In a tabloid society that is so media driven, it comes as no surprise that we all want to be heard and recognized, and that most of us would go to almost any heights to achieve such success. In the words of French author Jean-Claude Benoit, “The easiest way to be remembered is to either, (a) say something extremely intelligent, (b) get naked or (c) do a little bit of both. All of which are guaranteed to shock people.” Hence, if I followed his advice, I would forever be remembered as “that girl” who flashed all my judges and simultaneously quoted Socrates.

Our need to shock and “wow” people is a problem that has led to an intellectual hiccup in our society. This has been caused by our need to receive affirmation and recognition. Perhaps we need to solve it by reorganizing the way we approach accomplishment, so we can lead more productive lives.

Now, many of you may be asking yourselves exactly what the problem is? After all, in order for a society to successfully progress shocking ideas and actions are extremely necessary. Without them, we might still believe that the earth is flat or that Michael Jackson is actually white. However, these ideas are not always

delivered to invoke positive changes. Sometimes they have ulterior motives, such as personal gain and recognition. Consequently, there has been a mass production of art that isn't artistic and ideas that aren't logical. And it's only getting worse.

You see, with the average American household owning at least two TV sets, television has become an effortless way for us to witness these ideas. And we aren't turning it off, either.

This past summer, the Entertainment Channel debuted a new reality series. It was centered on the former *Playboy* Playmate, Anna Nicole Smith. The show poked fun at Anna's intelligence and planned its episodes around a series of events that would shock and appall the audience. Now, the educational value is about zero. And perhaps the only positive message that you can sort of, kind of, maybe, when-you-look-at-it-in-a-certain-way see is that it depicts the negative effects of what happens when you do an excessive amount of drugs.

So, why's the show still airing? I mean, cause if it's ratings were low it would be cancelled, right? But, they aren't, so it hasn't been. In fact, the debut of the show was the second biggest premier that the Entertainment Channel has ever had.

It's like critically acclaimed playwright Neil LaBute once put it, "Anyone can be provocative or shocking. Stand up in a classroom, a mall, wherever and go to the bathroom. Or paint yourself blue and run naked through a church screaming the names of the people you've slept with." Is that art, or did you just forget to take your medication?

So, how has our society progressed from an intellectual powerhouse that once celebrated wit and genius into a place where any cheap sex joke can snatch an audience's attention.

Well, in a recent study at Brown University, forty-eight percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 25 would compromise their morals in order to receive some type of fame or acknowledgement. And twenty-two percent of Americans over the age of 35 would sacrifice their morals in order to insure that after death they could leave some kind of significant impact behind them.

It's like Gary Mark Gilmore said, "We are sentenced to die the day we are born. And therefore, the idea of death is constantly lurking in our minds, consistently driving our actions." Because of this, we begin to believe that in this lifetime – which is guided and determined so much by time and limits, much like this speech – that we only have a small allotted amount of time to accomplish what feels like so much.

“Here, Ashley, take these ten minutes and change the beliefs of every person in this room. And while your doing that remember to be poignant, be creative, be provocative, say something no one has ever said, oh yeah, and don’t forget to look professional while you’re doing it.”

We have been placing an incredible amount of pressure on ourselves to formulate our lives into something great and meaningful. As a result, we jump at the chance to get anyone to listen to us, which has led to the creation of shows such as the *Anna Nicole Show* and MTV’s *Jackass*. It has fueled Howard Stern to get up every morning and let us listen to a straight half hour of a man passing gas which is what he actually aired on March 26, 2002.

It is like the housewives, like Maria Bedict who committed suicide in October of 1999. In a letter she wrote to her husband, she said, “How can I, a simple housewife, amount to anything other than just a lost sock in a dryer? Where no one even notices if you’re gone?” Our fear of not being noticed and being forgotten has now become the motivation behind our actions. We feel alienated, so we go out and we try to get people to listen to us.

“Everybody look at me, because I have something to say!”

That’s really great and all. So does she, probably him, too. How about every other person in this room, in this building, on this block, in this city, on this earth? Because, in order to be important, we have to be heard, right? And with over six billion people fighting for the same amount of speaking time that’s becoming increasingly difficult. We have to be famous, intellectual, talented or just outright brilliant to be anything other than just plain old average. And come on, let’s get serious, no one wants to be average because average isn’t even average anymore.

So now, I have to say something amazingly poignant, so that it can be quoted one hundred years from now by some kid who’s doing the same oratory topic as I am. Because that’s what we have to do to be great in this world.

In a study done in 1999 at the Bowen Research Institute in Massachusetts, it was reported that in seventy-four percent of attempted suicides victims reported feeling unimportant or insignificant compared to the peers in their workplaces and home lives. Yang Chee, the head researcher on the project, later commented that we can never be completely successful, content or even happy until we begin to realize that the quality of our life isn’t directly correlated with the quantity of people listening or paying attention to us. We have the ability to be extraordinary on our own.

We are all striving so desperately to become great men and women that we’re forgetting to take a real moment out to reflect upon what that really stands for. As

a result, a large portion of society has a skewed definition of what it means, “to be great.”

When asked what his thoughts were about the great men and women of society, George Bernard Shaw replied that, “...they don’t exist. We believe in them a lot like we used to believe in unicorns and dragons. The greatest man or woman is ninety-nine percent just like yourself.”

Perhaps that’s the way we should begin viewing our own lives? Not as lower or less important, but simply different. And instead of jumping at the chance to get people to listen to us because we need some kind of affirmation that our lives have meaning, perhaps we can begin to believe that whether the individual is famous, intellectual or, in my case, just an average Joe, their life always has a significant purpose. Our lives always have a significant purpose.

You know, and your purpose may not be to rewrite the Constitution, or star in your own sitcom, but as an individual you still have the ability to invoke change, even in it’s smallest form, which may be to, I don’t know, you know, teach a child how to pronounce a word or make a simple suggestion at work. Because making an impact on one person is far more beneficial than just being heard by a room full of people.

So, now that we’ve begun to understand that we don’t have to be the center of attention in order to lead meaningful and successful lives, perhaps we can begin to simply exist and along the way create some pretty significant impacts? Because, “Success,” as Gustav Flaubert put it, “is a result, not a goal.” So, let our motivation be to simply live while keeping in mind that in order to obtain success we don’t have to make fools out of ourselves.

Now, guaranteed, you probably won’t get as much attention as you would if you were, let’s say, the thousand-pound baby from the *Weekly World News* article, but perhaps that’s for the best. Cause, come on, who wants to be a mom eating baby, anyway?