

MEANDERINGS WATCHING THE TELETHON DURING A FALL AFTERNOON

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Every year about this time my mind wanders back to ancient Saturday mornings when I looked forward to playing rather than to watching football, to the smells I used to notice but now can only remember, to the sights that had more color than today's paintings, to the sounds that had more life than today's shouting. Everything has changed, but nothing has changed. Nothing has changed, except that I've changed.

Nothing is new. People get older, but nothing is new. Mental retardation isn't new. Disability isn't new. Sudden infant death isn't new. Even before Freud, people suffered from high anxiety. Even before Jerry Lewis, people gave to charity without knowing why they were giving, without thinking should they be giving. Every year about this time I worry about Jerry Lewis and his Muscular Dystrophy Telethon. Every year about this time I mull about the generations of people who gave to charity and learned the lesson of giving to forget rather than to remember, giving to absolve oneself rather than to dedicate oneself.

If stuffy academics would admit it, we would learn that some of those folks watch the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy Telethon on Labor Day. Mark Crispin Miller, writing for The New Republic, (which stuffy academics read), had some observations to make concerning that national mania (1981). Watching frenetic and very funny Jerry go from maudlin sentimentality to manic humor makes one nervous, makes even regular reviewers of tube fare nervous. Miller finds it nerve-wracking, "like watching an agitated schizophrenic conduct a heated group discussion in an empty room. He is many men in one, all of them demented" (p. 27).

I wasn't so agitated, but I also wasn't taken with the humor. Everyone (but Miller and this writer) loves Jerry--loves his "kids." Consequently, businesses give thousands, and the little guy watching at home gives a few hard-earned dollars. Even the other celebrities pay homage to Jerry (if not the "kids" themselves) on that national holiday. (Today, who remembers whether the holiday is Labor Day or Jerry Lewis Telethon day?)--Sammy Davis (still Jr.?), Sinatra, Pearl Bailey, and Bill Cosby. Jerry continues on, hour after hour, all for his "kids"---telling jokes, exhorting people to give, insulting those who give, insulting even more those who won't give. And he's breaking records for giving, or it's a bad year. Those who think it's all a terrible put-down of the handicapped, a fraud (albeit charitable), a charity for Jerry (but undeserved), are referred to as the enemy, the hardened unbelievers who may be likened to anyone simply out to spoil things.

In our business, everyone knows the means. But the unanswered question is: What is the goal? If we believe Miller, or take the time to watch Lewis for as long as we can stand it (and all of us can stand it for a little while), we may see that the goal is not to alleviate the suffering of the child with muscular dystrophy, or to unravel the puzzle of muscular dystrophy, but to nourish the ego of the comic. It's all very troubling.

It's troubling. But nothing is new. How different is Jerry Lewis from the philanthropist who gives a million and gets an honorary degree? How different is the corporation who gives dollars to Jerry from the university who gives degrees to its benefactors? How different is the telethon audience from the university audience? How different is Jerry Lewis from the Kennedys, the Fords, the Mellons? How different is he from Mother Theresa? How different was he from Albert Schweitzer? Maybe very different. Maybe not so different. Maybe people are people.

Reference

Miller, M. C. Sickness on t.v. The New Republic, October 7, 1981, pp. 27-29.