

Carnival Of Distractions 2

December 1, 2011 Category: American Culture

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PRELIMINARY REMARKS:

I begin with what may at first seem to be a harsh indictment. Many citizens here in the U.S. tend to think like adolescents because the general populace is often treated like adolescents.

How is this so? We demand to be treated as such because many of us are uninterested in being anything other than, well, adolescent. This is said not in an effort to demean an entire population; it's simply an attempt to provide a candid description of the current American psyche. This essay, then, is a wake-up call, not a put-down.

It is no secret that American politics is primarily comprised of two things: vapid theatre and savvy marketing. Complicity in this is almost universal; there are few innocent parties. Meanwhile, "participation" in the political process essentially amounts to we, the citizenry, shopping around for whatever consumer product (be it a person or policy proposal) catches our fancy. We are seen as "target consumers" rather than as citizens because *that's how we see ourselves*. Consequently, there is minimal deliberation, just "shopping". To *participate*, then, means to *select a brand* (namely: the one that we find most appealing). Democracy is therefore primarily conceived as a kind of consumer activity. Peruse the market, pick a brand, and congratulate yourself for "participating". (When money is considered speech, this all makes perfect sense.)

We are conditioned to think of everything in terms of "shopping". Of course, this works out splendidly well for those who are looking to sell us something. But why are so many of us so readily taken in by this charade? We play along because we're accustomed to thinking about all activities in terms of *buying stuff*. To put it another way: Being the hyper-consumerist culture that we are, we perceive the world in terms of a *marketplace*—be it for pick-up trucks, political candidates, healthcare, education, or breakfast cereals. When everything is seen as a *product*, everything will be treated as a *business*. Public services are thereby rendered anathema.

What is at the root of this widespread American proclivity?

Part of the explanation is as follows: We are an intellectually impoverished society. Why? Because we are chronically distracted by a relentless pageant of spectacular fluff. This Carnival of Distractions has engendered an epidemic intellectual sclerosis in the body politic. This sclerosis has enabled the Carnival of Distractions to persist, unquestioned. Many of us don't merely tolerate the carnival; we're addicted to it. After all, it's a *carnival*.

BACKGROUND:

We Americans demand to be entertained. Is it any surprise, then, that elections are little other than stage-managed melodramas (with a cast of characters who are judged on their *performance* rather than the objective merit of their ideas)? Even as we're perpetually bedazzled by the "show" that is staged all around us, we lose touch with the simple things—things that used

to make life so important. When we're willing to pay attention to *anything*, we tend to miss the important things.

When phones play videos and take pictures, when both our TV and video game console are attached to us wherever we go, the Carnival of Distractions has completely taken over. Time for critical reflection on a typical day: three seconds. Hurry up, or you'll miss the next video clip / Tweet / fashion update / text message / blog post.

Those—like me—who bring this to people's attention are dismissed for hemming and hawing...for being out of touch with the new zeitgeist. Ok, fair enough. So the question is: What, exactly, are we supposed to be "in touch" with?

When we're always clamoring to "keep up", we have no time to engage in critical reflection. The incessant, pointless chatter essentially "crowds out" our ability to deliberate. Average duration of an interview on TV: three minutes. (Enough time to get in a couple zingers, a pre-rehearsed sound-bite, and a canned response before the next commercial break.) Is this all that our public discourse can be? Aren't we capable of more? Currently, the jury is out. But here's the catch: Civic-mindedness (a prerequisite for any functioning democracy) becomes untenable in this climate. As a result, civic-mindedness is summarily rendered obsolete.

Day in and day out, on TV's most popular chit-chat shows, handy cosmetic tips, fashion updates, the latest celebrity gossip, and the pseudo-scandal du jour are the topics of choice. The programming is largely comprised of mundane small-talk...peppered here and there with a manufactured spectacle. Producers seek whatever candy-coated inanity will keep the audience occupied before the next commercial break. (So long as the viewers are amused "in the moment", it is surmised, they will be perfectly content to remain habitually insipid. Mission accomplished.)

Even weather and traffic reports—largely irrelevant on any given day—are sensationalized to the point of distraction. Fabricated "urgency" can make any banality seem astonishingly important. And so it goes: every car crash in the area, every anticipation of precipitation, every fire down the street, and every murder across town is reported...discussed as if it is of utmost importance that *everyone* be *fully apprized* of each riveting detail. We sensationalize each impending "snow storm"...even as we disregard the long-term consequences of Neoliberal economic policy and Neocon foreign policy. After all, which one makes for better theater: a "weather alert" or a critical analysis of geo-political events?

And so it goes: Our lives are oriented around "stay tuned for the next exciting development!" Very few of the "stories" that so captivate our attention help the citizenry become wiser. The programming is geared to titillate, not to edify. Consequently, most of it is basically tabloid fodder masquerading as "breaking news". After all is said and done, tabloid fodder is what sells. So that's what we are fed.

Insofar as sensationalized fluff is all we "consume", we become too distracted to take note of...other things. The explanation for all this is quite simple: What we often refer to as "the news" is no longer a public service; it is a business. "Good business" is about meeting demand better than the next guy—whatever that demand may happen to be. If it's snazzy theatrical presentations with minimal substance, well, then so be it.

Unsurprisingly, Media corporations have designed their business plans accordingly. After all, maximizing market-share is about catering to the lowest common denominator. The target audience craves a good show. Naturally, then, “the news” has become more performance-art than journalism. Something will be a “big hit” if it attracts audience members—even if it’s stultifyingly fatuous. **Spectacle sells.** So that’s what is primarily offered by major media outlets. To do otherwise would be bad for business.

When it’s all about the bottom line, mainstream media becomes what it has become: show-biz. It serves not as a desperately-needed counterpoint to the Carnival of Distractions, it serves as *the major facilitator* of that carnival. “We’re just giving the people what they want,” is exactly explanation we should expect a corporate-run media establishment to give.

So here we are: fully apprised of—as I say—handy cosmetic tips, fashion updates, the latest celebrity gossip, and the pseudo-scandal du jour. It’s what we’ve asked for.

Even a cursory survey of American pop culture reveals the following: Being petty is *en vogue*—as long as you can make money off of it. (Being erudite is pointless if there’s no savvy business plan.) Naturally, then, most people conduct themselves accordingly. In order to *meet demand*, the impresarios of pop culture *follow suit*. It’s a positive feedback loop: That’s all that we want, so that’s all that they give us, so that’s all we expect, so that’s all that we get. This brings us full circle: All we want is what we’ve become acclimated to.

The following essay will assess the unsettling characteristics exhibited by current U.S. culture, then offer a likely explanation for them. Finally, I will suggest a prognosis—a way that might possibly ameliorate the intellectual emaciation responsible for many of the dysfunctions with which we’re contending.

THESIS:

America’s intellectually sclerotic demos is the primary focus of this critique. My contention is twofold:

- The sclerosis is both *a product of* and *reinforced by* pop culture
- By dissolving civic-mindedness, the sclerosis is undermining democracy

The degenerate state of our culture is largely—though certainly not entirely—attributable to the daily habits engendered by a booming culture industry. This is not a new theory, but it is certainly not discussed enough these days. The deleterious effect on our public discourse is only part of the story. The very manner in which we think about things has been transformed.

Alas, whenever we do hear diatribes assailing “American culture”, it is typically issuing from hidebound, conservative ideologues. The present thesis should not be confused with that kind of attack. Archaism (the reminiscence of a chimerical “good ol’ days” that needs to be gloriously resurrected) is not the basis of this critique.

To put it plainly: The grievance issuing from “the right wing” is, in many ways, the *exact opposite* of the grievance voiced here. Being hyper-traditionalists (and even puritans), *their* complaint is that America is insufficiently Christian / pious / capitalist / patriotic / provincial /

homogenous. In other words, for them, the concern is that Americans are too secular, too concerned with social justice, too pacifist, too cosmopolitan, and too accommodating of dissent and diversity.

I'm turning the typical assessment on its head. Rarely do we hear a critique of culture of the sort offered here. In a sense, I'm contending that American culture is flawed because it's too *conservative*. This case is rarely made because, as you'll see, to make this argument is to come off as, well, rather obnoxious. As Americans, our false pride often precludes us from this kind of frank self-criticism. After all, national honor is at stake. So we feel the need to uphold the glossy veneer of American exceptionalism.

Putting aside our high self-regard for a moment, the following points may be made. No high horse required.

POINTS OF ANALYSIS:

Within an marketplace, *supply and demand* is an immutable force. So long as media is exclusively treated as a market, offerings will be determined by these market forces. As for cultivating erudition? In between watching ballgames and doing laundry: not a chance. The consequence of this hierarchy of priorities is plain to see: A populace that is chronically preoccupied with inconsequential things...even as it remains largely unconcerned with learning about (objectively) important matters.

This intellectual malnourishment is at the root of our beleaguered democracy. A survey of American pop culture reveals the following peculiar traits:

- Inanity is deemed “cool” so long as it is entertaining. For many media outlets, vacuity is par for the course. Being insipid is fashionable, so it's tolerated—even revered. We Americans glorify vapidness, and balk whenever we encounter anything foreign—like, say, genuine substance.
- Avarice is championed...so long as it's the “right people” doing it (and only the subaltern getting screwed).
- It's “hip” to be superficial—so long as it's *glamorous* superficiality. Because inauthenticity is routinely glamorized in mainstream media, we've become accustomed to it. Thus, most of us don't see any problem with it when we encounter it in our personal lives.
- Narcissism is perfectly fine...so long as you do it in the prescribed manner. Being self-absorbed is standard operating procedure. Now that we find ourselves in an environment in which EVERYONE is expected to be self-absorbed, everyone will tend toward that norm.

To point all this out isn't to be snarky. It's to offer an accurate description of media trends. Market forces have led us here. The key, then, is to rise above market forces. But how?

DIAGNOSIS:

We Americans are a peculiar crowd. We obsess over celebrity figures who have never contributed anything constructive to human society. We lionize people who have never achieved any noble feat—yet have nevertheless managed to accumulate stupendous spoils for themselves. (Indeed, we lionize them exclusively *because* they've somehow managed to accumulate stupendous spoils.) Meanwhile, many of us have almost no regard for the greatest minds of our

time. After all, what fun is it to heed the discourse of a humble, soft-spoken, wise, old man who offers no drama or glamour? We'd rather pay attention to something more...provocative and titillating...like, say, Donald Trump or a cat playing the piano.

To put it plainly: Many of us base our esteem of this or that figure on rather preposterous criteria. We do so not because we're all idiots, but because it's the way we've been conditioned to allot esteem. Consequently, many of the people we should probably be paying a lot of attention to are marginalized. The limelight, meanwhile, goes to the other guy—the one who puts on a good show. In today's climate, performance almost always trumps substance.

What am I talking about? Across America, one observes two quite absurd things:

1. There is an abiding fascination with prurience (episodes of executive fellatio are especially tantalizing, it seems)
2. Many are incessantly consumed by petty fixations (e.g. who's wearing what, who's dating who, and what our next Facebook post should be)

In this scheme, the typical citizen is kept perpetually distracted—*diverted* from pursuing any means of genuine edification rather than *prevented* from doing so. Predictably, our culture has become intellectually emaciated as a result. Yet we're too pre-occupied with the Carnival of Distractions to notice. When allegedly straight men concern themselves with what other men are doing with their penises, we have gone through the looking glass. When we treat zygotes as if they were full-fledged humans and poor people as if they were not, we have gone down the rabbit hole. When we care more about which style of hand-bag we should buy next than how many children are going without healthcare, we have wandered into a strange land. And when corporations are seen as citizens, we've entered the Twilight Zone. What is going on here?

The answer: Nothing mysterious. All of the above is perfectly fine...so long as my favorite singer makes it to the next round of American Idol. That's the catch. As we become preoccupied with the Carnival of Distractions, we become inured to our own obliviousness.

Handy cosmetic tips, fashion updates, the latest celebrity gossip, and the pseudo-scandal du jour. film at eleven. Is it any wonder that America's general populace is so egregiously ill-informed—yet perfectly smug? Yes: we Americans are fantastically smug with how we are. But here's some food for thought: Look at the sorts of things we care about on a typical day; then calculate the chance that any one of us will procure a solid understanding of economic policy, foreign policy, or social policy in the next week.

It's fine to really, really want to know the score of last night's ballgame...or what the latest fashion trend is or what's going to happen on tonight's prime time drama. There's nothing wrong with TMZ, Dancing With The Stars, Twilight, and Harry Potter. But if that's ALL one care's about, then one will often end up being woefully un-informed on matters salient to the sustenance of democratic society. That is to say, while staying magnificently "in the know" on those points of interest, a person may well remain oblivious when it comes to (objectively) important issues. Such a person will thereby default on the civic responsibility—a responsibility with which every citizen is charged in a participatory democracy.

So, while tens of millions of working class people vote for politicians who tout "trickle down" myths, they can rest assured that their favorite contestant is kicking ass on their favorite Reality

TV show. We should remind ourselves: A mentally lethargic *yet well-entertained* rabble is an easily manipulated rabble. Just ask the consuls of the Roman Empire who provided enthralling theater in the Coliseum. Even then, it was understood that so long as the rabble are kept sufficiently amused, they'll go along with the established order.

The rule oligarchs have learned since time immemorial: Keep the demos incessantly *amused*, and it will be putty in your hands. Any savvy parent knows that this is the most effective way to manipulate children: so long as they're kept sufficiently amused, they'll stay "in line". (The other gimmick, of course, is to keep the demos *insecure*...or in fear of a menacing nemesis lurking "somewhere out there".)

The best way to manipulate people is to distract them from the fact that they're being manipulated. When one can get people to enjoy their subjugation, they construe it as empowerment. These are truths as old as Machiavelli. This isn't to say that Reality TV and Facebook are some diabolical conspiracy to keep us in the dark. It's simply to say that there DOESN'T NEED to be a diabolical conspiracy to keep us in the dark; we're perfectly content to keep ourselves in the dark of our own accord.

Those not actively engaged in participatory, deliberative democracy are much more susceptible to manipulation—and consequently often find themselves looking at things in a simple-minded way. All the better for the oligarchs. Simple minds are malleable, pliable, supine. Yes, it is quite possible to be myopic and obtuse at the same time. Being limited to reactionary thinking renders people prime candidates for whatever ideological mindset is foisted upon them. And so it goes. The impresarios ply their trade with impunity.

So what's really going on here? Sociology 101 offers some insight: With a thoroughly choreographed mental disposition, everything is assessed in terms of ideological purity. Here, *conformity with anointed norms* is the barometer for *legitimacy*. Iconoclasm is shunned. Homogeneity is romanticized. Decadence becomes a fetish. Heterodoxy is demonized. Dissent from the established order is a sure ticket to disenfranchisement. And any participation in a counter-culture is dismissed as "deviant behavior". In sum: Our own pop culture is used against us. There is a powerful incentive structure in place, cajoling us to go along with the established order...or court ostracism. In this scheme, we're implicitly told: "Play along, or risk being marginalized." And none of us want to miss out on the action.

History has shown that an intellectually impoverished culture is an incubator for cult activity. Such a culture is therefore primed for the metastasization of right-wing movements. (Ergo the G.O.P. here in America.) In this "default" mental state, everything is seen in a wonderfully appealing, simplistic way: no cognitive exertion required. Observe, for example, the nature of right-wing views pertaining to both foreign and domestic policy. I'll briefly address each in turn:

Neocon foreign policy is predicated on a Manichean worldview. This way of seeing the world is handily reinforced by the simple narrative found in many mainstream dramas—on both the big and silver screen. Such a narrative posits a world of good guys (by definition, us) pitted against bad guys (by definition, the other guy)...and that's all there is to it. When one sees the world through this lens, much of U.S. foreign policy makes perfect sense. (Add to this the Providentialism indicative of "American Exceptionalism" and, well, right-wing ideology becomes virtually irresistible.)

The Manichean narrative appeals to the adolescent in all of us. If adolescent-level thinking is all we're accustomed to, then hawkish foreign policy will resonate with us more than would some bland cosmopolitanism. In this scheme, informed dissent is deemed "unpatriotic" (instead of *the basis for a vibrant democracy*). Meanwhile, national chauvinism is called "patriotism". To be anti-establishment is to be a "subversive" or some kind of heretic. Not acquiescing to prevailing cultural norms is labeled "deviant" or "un-American". (Fascism, we may want to remind ourselves, is an extreme case of this very phenomenon.)

Neoliberal economic policy is predicated on enticing visions of the hallowed "American Dream"—a portrayal found in every outlet of media. Each depiction implicitly announces, "One day soon, this too could be you! So don't begrudge those who are already living the dream; you'll just shoot yourself in the foot." In a world where the affluent are revered *for being* affluent, and where people are renown *for being* celebrities, this logic seems eminently plausible. "If I'm not living the good life yet, I have nobody to blame but myself. After all, the super-rich are super-rich because they deserve it, right?" Every talk show, every advertisement, every tabloid rag, and every gossip mag validates this (preposterous) belief. "Life," we're told as we're shown romantic portrayals the vaunted *high life*, "Is all about getting HERE" (queue the scene with the guy lounging on his yacht surrounded by scantily-clad vixens).

Instead of the standard for a healthy society being *how well the worst off are treated*, the gold standard for American pride is *how well off the best off can become*. Americans love to say that "money can't buy happiness"...yet devote every day to trying to buy it anyway. After all, the American Dream is defined as a McMansion with two Lamborghinis in the garage...and a diamond-studded Rolex for good measure. This portrayal is stupendously seductive. "The good life" has no place for community healthcare centers for impoverished families.

So, while we occupy ourselves with the next stage-managed spectacle, we can rest assured that the American Dream lies just around the corner if we play our cards right. It seems to follow logically, then, that we see basic public infrastructure and vital social services as some kind of tyrannical "government takeover" (instead of a means of empowerment for the rank and file). Once this paradigm is ingrained, we equate "good government" with a government that "stays out of our way" and "leaves us alone" to fend for ourselves. In this way, one can view exploitative systems of highly-concentrated private power as the quintessence of "economic freedom"...while endorsing the eradication of organized labor. "Entrepreneurs" are what we call people who have somehow—it doesn't really matter how—made a pile of money for themselves. So *that* is what we're supposed to emulate. Unsurprisingly, that is *precisely* what many Americans emulate.

Some of us are so confused, we call universal public healthcare "big government"...and in the very next breath call a grotesquely bloated military-industrial complex "strong defense". We somehow feel more "secure" when we wage wars against the caricature of a menacing nemesis—a caricature depicted by those who profit off of those wars. Such dubious narratives seem eminently plausible when much of what one knows about the world has been gleaned from *Regis & Kelly*. One can rest assured that all is well when one can tell the difference between the Kardashian sisters...even if one can't explain the difference between demand-side and supply-side economics.

Priorities.

We'd rather prevent two people of the same gender from getting married next door than prevent crimes against humanity overseas. Actually, we'd rather just sit back and watch Reality TV shows...but every once in a while we pick a political stance (so that we can pat ourselves on the back for "getting involved"). Morning talk shows suffice for getting the latest scoop on hot topics. Meanwhile, we can partake in a consumer culture that prizes our "freedom" to shop (and to own) over any other freedom. We only covet negative liberties—unconcerned with the crucial role of positive liberties in a working democracy.

Why should I take the time to read Kant when I'm too busy toiling away at a job I despise so that I can pay off the credit card bill I ran up buying the exorbitantly-priced, trendy clothes I was persuaded I *had to have* by an omni-present fashion industry? (We forget that there is a difference between making a good living and making a good life.) When we're convinced that wealth is a barometer for esteem, our priorities become skewed. But that's okay, as long as I'm free to decide which stock-option I get to have...

A hyper-consumerist culture instills in the public psyche the notion that property rights trump human rights. How? Because we define ourselves by what we own. Everything is seen as a consumer product—education, medicine, candidates for public office... Consumerism is thereby seen as the primary expression of democracy.

It's difficult to be aware of structural inequalities when one is under the impression that actual inequalities are simply the natural outcome of talent and hard work. No matter how horrendously skewed and flagrantly a-meritocratic such outcomes may actually be, people will go along with an established order they've been persuaded is eminently just. Americans have been conditioned to romanticize the underpinnings of social injustice...all the while under the impression that they're standing up for some abstract thing known as "free markets" or "free enterprise"...or some other magnificent-sounding thing we're supposed to sanctify.

We're a cog in the Machine, yet construe our subordination as emancipation. It is a classic case of false consciousness, relentlessly reinforced by current cultural trends. It works like a charm...so long as we remain blissfully distracted. For the Roman rabble, it was the "freedom" to watch gladiator fights in the arena. For us, it's Facebook, Reality TV, political pundits, and tabloid fodder.

PROGNOSIS:

How do we remedy the widespread intellectual impoverishment that currently afflicts our society? The answer is, in a word: education. This is a very complex issue, so I will focus here on one salient point: We live in a nation where it is quite rare for anyone to read important (non-fiction) books of their own accord. It's why we so often eagerly vote against our own interests. It's why charlatans regularly become superstars. It's why "The Secret" sold like hotcakes. And it's why Donald Trump is considered the model of Americana.

One can tell a lot about a culture by what the typical person spends time reading. An indication of what's wrong with American culture is the allocation of space in major bookstores. The Barnes & Noble in the small city where I grew up—a relatively large store—now has ZERO philosophy section. None. That fact alone is disturbing, yet very telling. (For some consolation, it

now has a large toy section.)

The store boasts a small “social science” shelf (a portion of which actually has some social science books), and an even tinier “science” shelf—each with about the same offering as the bookshelves in my bedroom. No kidding. The “history” section is mostly “military history”. The “current affairs” section is essentially a “political pundits” section—peppered with a few books written by bona fide scholars. Meanwhile, the store has *aisles upon aisles* of New Age and Christian pulp. I reiterate: *aisles upon aisles* of New Age and Christian pulp.

Why is this? What does this say about us as a culture?

The immediate explanation is quite straight-forward: In the interest of maximizing revenue, Barnes & Noble, like any other retailer, allocates space to *whatever sells*. Fair enough. But, in the nation’s biggest bookstore chain, when the astrology section is far larger than the entire compliment of science books, something is very, very wrong. After all, space-allocation in a major bookstore is a decent barometer for what people are reading—when they’re reading at all. (As for a toy section in a Barnes & Noble...)

We remain comfortably ensconced in our custom-fit microcosms, living lives that—though not completely insular—are *selectively* open. Parochial mindsets are the rule, not the exception. Our exposure to anything outside our bubble is often limited to US Weekly, Starz, and People magazine...or Oprah, Regis & Kelly, TMZ, and The View... or The New York Post, The Daily News, and—in Britain—the red tops. On a typical day in the American life, genuine edification is rarely on the docket.

Those hermetically sealed in their sanctified ideological cocoon will watch / listen to their political pundit of choice (or, if they read, will read the things like Spectator, the Weekly Standard, or the National Review). We find our niche in the blogosphere, and pat ourselves on the back for “staying on top of things”. Echo chambers offer the gratification of having one’s coveted dogma incessantly validated. Consequently, such things appeal to large swaths of the population. Cultivating erudition is anathema to most Americans.

There’s nothing wrong with watching, say, Chelsea Handler every now and then...but if that’s ALL we ever do, then things go awry. There’s little harm in reading a tabloid rag or gossip mag from time to time...but if that’s ALL we read, then we become—well—thoroughly amused idiots. If the working class can be duped by the power-elite into thinking that the super-rich should be thought of as “the job-creators” and “the producers” (instead of as, say, plutocrats), then the working class has to be completely “out to lunch”. The “catch” is to ensure that they’re always under the impression that they are “in the know”. (While reading *In Touch* magazine, one is not inclined to say to himself: “I’m completely oblivious to what’s going on.”)

...Which brings us back to the resolution: education.

Masonscott.org offers a list of the twenty MIN-Ds (most important non-fiction of the decade). A disturbingly small portion of the adult population has read *even one* of those twenty landmark books—let alone all of them. The few people who *have* opted to read most of them are often not recognized for their augmented erudition. Why? In America, the “incentive structure” for edification is, shall we say, woefully flawed. After all, celebrities are typically not among the greatest minds...so what’s the point of cultivating a great mind? If you want to “get ahead”, get

with the program...and learn to play the game. (Donald Trump did, so you can too.)

Alas, when all one knows about “what’s going on” comes from *Good Morning America*, our country is in trouble. Talk shows are all fine and dandy—indeed, we all need idle amusements once in a while. But when they are the **ONLY** way we inform ourselves about the world, deliberative democracy becomes untenable. When youth are graduating from high school never having read Thomas Paine or Karl Marx, never having learned to compose a well-fashioned essay, and never having cultivated rudimentary analytical thinking skills, how can we expect our society to work?

So I repeat my thesis: Many citizens here in the U.S. tend to *think* like adolescents because the general populace is often *treated* like adolescents. The solution to our problems, then, boils down to this: We adults should start conducting our lives as adults. Only then will our culture change. Only then will we emerge from our self-imposed immaturity.