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# Who Are We?

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There's a story I've always liked about the formidable nineteenth century suffragist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The leading thinker and orator of that effort, herself the mother of six children, Stanton spent at least forty of her eighty plus years travelling the country bringing the gospel of woman suffrage to often not-too-friendly-audiences. On one such occasion she was about to be introduced by a young woman who wasn't battle-hardened. Stanton observed that the woman was trembling like a leaf at the prospect of presenting her before the hooting derisive crowd gathered to give the women a hard time. Trying to calm the bad case of nerves of her younger counterpart, Stanton is said to have remarked: "My dear, we must have a bit of stage courage.

I thought of that comment when I read a draft of "Watch Out for the Children" (Institute for American Values 2000) and again this morning when I listened to the presentations and discussion. We must have a bit of courage. For it takes a bit of courage - some might even call it foolhardiness - to swim upstream against the current. Courage is needed to call sellers and buyers to account. Courage is demanded in order to say in no uncertain terms: The bucks must stop here. Not everything is for sale. We aremore than consumers. We are more than calculators of our own self-interest. We are more than so much Silly Putty to be pummeled and molded into the shapes most desired by those who stand to gain by convincing us that it would be better if we had two more things, or a dozen more things; or if we were garbed in jeans with a certain label

[1] This paper was delivered on the occasion of the release of the Institute for American Values' report to the nation, *Watch Out for Children: A Mothers' Statement to Adverstisers.*

rather than plain old jeans, or if... .well, you can fill in all the blanks, you can connect all the dots.

When you cut through to the heart of the matter, this report asks us to ask ourselves that most basic of all questions: WHO ARE WE? That this just happens to be the title of my most recent book is, of course, purely intentional. I was driven to that title because I realized that the questions I was exploring could not be raised, much less answered, unless I reflected on the fundamental issue of who we are and what, therefore, we are called to be. I refer to issues like the return of eugenics as we drive to create perfect human specimens genetically, or what we believe will be such; to the collapse of limits to what can be bought and sold - it is eggs and sperm and organs now, will babies be next? Some say sure, why not? Why should that barrier not fall? Lurking beneath or behind each one of these complex matters is the daunting, haunting question: WHO ARE WE?

At one point, perhaps, human beings could take who they were more or less for granted. If that was ever true in the past, it hasn't been for some time. At the turn of the twentieth century, to be sure, people thought they had a handle on things. Europe was awash in a gush of self-congratulation. The West was on the high road to progress. Nothing could stop us now. Things were betting bigger and better and one fine day. ...Within two decades, that dream had become a nightmare, first, with the unparalleled slaughter of the Western front in World War I, followed by a world wide depression, the rise of National Socialism in Germany and communist totalitarianism in the Soviet Union, each sustained by a murderous ideology based on a strong vision of who WE were: WE are the racially perfect master race; they are fit only for elimination.

WE are the victorious and triumphant class bringing into being a worker's paradise, THEY are the reactionary trying to thwart this forward motion so THEY must go to gulags or be made to disappear altogether. We fought World War II against such ideologies.
We sustained a long effort against tyranny during the Cold War. Democracy, however fitfully, came to once authoritarian societies. Surely now, at long last, a few optimistically proffered, everything will be made better if not perfect.

But with external foes bested, we began to take a good, hard look at ourselves. And at least some of us weren't too happy with much of what we saw. We saw a marked cynicism toward politics and public life. We saw a turning away from civic engagement. We saw families imploding in record numbers, as least so far back as reliable data takes us. This recognition prompted our Council on Civil Society and our Call to the Nation ("A Call to Civil Society: Why Democracy Needs Moral Truths", Institute for American Values, 1997) just a few years ago, a document that helped to spark a nation-wide debate on just who we were as citizens. It turned out we had become a nation of spectators, not citizens, in the words of another report, this one issued by the National Commission on Civic Renewal. We are still struggling with how to respond to this recognition. And now, appropriately enough, we are asked to respond again, this time to something that, if anything, cuts deeper and pierces to the very heart of the culture and of each and every home: HOW do we define our purposes? How do we understand what is desirable? What is good? What is beautiful? What we must have? What, by contrast, we merely want? What, indeed, is the good life we all yearn for? Who defines this for us? Our churches? Our synagogues? Other institutions of our society, our schools, perhaps? Or is that done FOR US and

TO US by those who have a huge, self-interested stake in the answer? Do they think of us as pliable material to be molded into desirable shapes? Are we indeed such?

Tough questions. We would rather not face these questions. Nor did our forebears, including the great St. Augustine way back in the fourth century, but face them he did and we remain challenged all these centuries later by his reflections and his conclusions. He set in motion the Western tradition of intense self-scrutiny and critical reflection. Who am I? And he answered: I am a creature who wants to do good, but often does not. My will is weak. I take the easy way out. But more than that, I sometimes do what I know I ought not just because I want to - not for any particular gain, but because intense desire is involved. Augustine recognized the ways in which we become habituated to doing one thing or another and just how easy it is to take the easy way out - far easier than struggling with what one ought to do and going against the grain, perhaps even wounding our social relations - what my gang wants me to do; what my peers think of as routine - should I decide not to go along. We know, for example, that cheating is widespread among schoolchildren, especially teenagers. But that isn't the scarey part. It is no surprise to most ethical thinkers that there is widespread defection from a norm. What is most troubling is that an increasing number of our young people have no problem with cheating. The big question is: how can you get away with it? The assumption is: everyone does it, or wants to do it, and in a dog-eat-dog world, you do what you have to do to get ahead. Who am I? Am I out to make a killing at my neighbor's expense, my neighbor being whoever is before me at a given point in time, whether friend, schoolmate, co-worker, or colleague? Not wanting to think of ourselves as bad people - no one wants to believe that - we engage in a process Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan a few years ago called "defining deviancy down" - we simply set the norm

lower. Then the infraction doesn't seem so serious. Or the infraction itself becomes the new norm. There's small cheating of no consequence and then there's big cheating. We don't want big cheating but ordinary, everyday, garden variety cheating, well, that's another matter. So it goes with us.

St. Augustine didn't stop with the intense and tormenting query to himself – Who am I, before my God, my family, my friends, and my fellow men and women – he pushed the questioning further. He offered up one of the first sustained cultural criticisms of an entire society, in Augustine's case the society and culture of the late Roman empire. In the process of writing up his brilliant deconstruction of that culture and society, he offered a standard by which we can ask the "who" question in the plural: WHO ARE WE? What will be written on the tombstone of the entire culture, so to speak, what is our reigning motto, our reigning symbol, what will be our epitaph? Here's how he did this. He began to ask the political and cultural question that is the most basic of all: how do you define and understand a people, an assemblage of persons who together make up what we call a society? He examined critically answers that had been offered by his precedessors in the world of philosophy, including the great Roman rhetorician, writer, and politician, Cicero. Cicero's definition of a people is okay so far as it goes, Augustine concluded, but it doesn't go far enough. For Cicero had defined a people as an assemblage of human beings united by shared self-interests, more or less. For Augustine, this was a pinched definition. Mutual self-interest is too low as a common denominator: you have to cut deeper if you would pierce to the very heart of how a people is to be understood. You have to look at what they love in common.

So he defines a people thus: "A people is the association of a multitude of rational beings united by a common agreement on the objects of their love." It follows that "to observe the character of a particular people we must examine the objects of its love." Thinking about how we would go about meeting the challenge Augustine presents should be enough to make us squirm and it draws us immediately to the document unveiled here today. What do we love in common? What enchants us? What beguiles us? What do we want? What do we 'gotta have'? Much of what we seem to worship nowadays is our own unlimited desire. Who we are is presented as voracious children who have never grown up...and need not. We are told we need to start consuming earlier and earlier and never stop until the very day we die, having no doubt golfed that morning. When I was writing WHO ARE WE? - I noticed an ad for an automobile that was pitched to adults, but adults construed as, at base, needy little kids. The ad copy reads: "Little Kids are Selfish. Impulsive. They Don't Make Rational Decisions. When They See Something They Want, They Want it Now. Little Kids Have a Lot of Fun. Hmmm." We want it and we want it now. That is who we are.

If we just get that car, that new house, that expensive garb or piece of equipment ... but we discover that pleasure is an evanescent thing. As we wake up each morning, we likely find that what satisfied us the day before no longer does. The restless engine of desire never sleeps. None of this would surprise St. Augustine. But he insisted as well that there is something in us that yearns for a greater purpose; for a richer meaning; for a more balanced life, one that is not caught endlessly circling in the narrow orbit of the-self. To try to swim against the cultural tide is no easy thing, not for oneself, not for one's children. And in a culture as individualistic as our own, we often put everything in the lap of individuals: you don't like it, you do something about it.

Many are trying. But such efforts are so challenging it seems as if those of us issuing the challenge are demanding something akin to heroism of those parents who want to draw the line, who hope to protect young children from being shaped entirely by cultural forces that tell us we are most human when we are acquiring things; we are most likely to be happy when we have those things; the world itself is a vast engine set up to serve MY wants, ...on and on. Of course, we are trained to think like this in a world in which everything, including human meaning, value, and purpose is reduced to what can be bought and sold. When nothing is off limits. The authors and signatories of "Watch Out for the Children" are not looking for heroes and cannot reasonably expect such but, rather, for engaged, reflective parents who have come to recognize that they cannot do the job of nurturing their children unless certain powerful forces at work in and on our culture are tamed. "Watch Out for Children" urges us to think cogently and seriously about limits and not simply to cave in to the widespread conviction that limits are made to be broken and were arbitrary in any case so what's the big deal. The conviction that there are no real barriers to the complete take over of every aspect of life by what we call 'the money culture' surely lies behind the thinking of those who believe you can even assign a monetary value to a human life. By contrast, those for whom each and every human life is unique and precious are, day by day, ceding ground to those for whom nothing is intrinsically sacred, nothing is off limits. The time has come to draw the line and for that one

needs a bit of stage courage.

For breaking what has become a culturally sanctioned habit is no easy matter. Each of us knows that because we've no doubt had bad habits of our own that we tried to break, often without great

success. But that is what is being called for here today: to really watch out for children we must break the chokehold of a very bad habit, one that casts aside all inhibitions and barriers to a way of life that enshrines consumerism as primus inter pares among human activities. When we issue calls along these lines we recognize something else: it is very difficult to have a serious social, political, and cultural conversation about these matters, in part because of our lazy, penchant for labelling the views of those whose views we would rather not engage as "anti-choice" or as stifling freedom or as limiting self-expression or some other thing that we are enjoined to deem tantamount to anti-Americanism.

Let me give you one example drawn from our "Call to Civil Society" (Institute for American Values 2000). In that document, we offered a series of possible avenues for transformation in the direction of re-creating a well-functioning civil society. Such a civil society requires a variety of strong plural associations, from families to churches to schools to labor associations to government doing at all levels the hard work of democratic civil life. Given the widespread lament among Americans that too much television programming is too violent, too crude, too sexually explicit, certainly for the 'consumption' of children, we called for voluntary reinstatement by programmers of what used to be called "family hour", that time of the day when families - at least families used to do this - are likely to be gathered watching a show. Together. When I was making the rounds giving talks and lectures about Civil Society and our "Call", I would invariably encounter at least one highly agitated member of each and every audience who denounced our recommendation to reinstitute a voluntary family hour policy as a sneaky pitch for "censorship" on our part. Censorship, I would query back? How is it censorship to call for a voluntary measure? How can it be censorship to ask for those responsible to consider an

alternative? Indeed, take it a step further: how is censorship to engage in that good-old-fashioned-democratic-political-weapon, then consumer boycott, aimed at those engaged in sponsoring a damaging program or underwriting a demeaning advertising campaign. But, in the minds of radical libertarians and their numbers are on the increase, to consider such possibilities means the harsh hand of the censor is lurking somewhere ready to slap down our sacred right to watch programs that routinely degrade human beings and represent us at our moments of selfishness, cruelty, self aggrandizement, and low self-seeking.

When we are teaching children how to spot figures inside larger figures, we query: What doesn't belong? What's wrong with this picture? Well, what is wrong with our current cultural picture? What doesn't belong here? The tendency to assault robust critique as part of some reactionary effort to destroy American freedom doesn't belong in a serious discussion. There may be a few folks out there in America who want to set themselves up as gurus of censorship, but I daresay none of them is here today and certainly none of them wrote or signed "Watch Out for Children". Instead, we are asking that we ask ourselves important and enduring questions: What sort of adults do we want our children to become? What sort of adults are they likely to become if they are subjected to a non-stop diet of advertising that tells them what is human is acquiring? What sort of society have we created when parents, even with their most determined efforts, must fail to stem the rushing tide as that torrent now surges even in those spaces that used to be off-shore, so to speak, like our public schools?

Make no mistake about it, habits are being formed willy-nilly by what it is kids take in. Habits that generate and build short-term gratification as a norm and impatience as an ideal. As a

culture, we are losing habits of endurance, habits needed to sustain families and social institutions over the long haul. If who we are is one who maximizes his or her own utilities, we lose that commitment to patience that parenting and citizenship both require. We have to learn, and it isn't easy, how to hang in there over the long haul. We have to learn, and it isn't easy, how to right ourselves when we falter. We have to learn, and it isn't easy, how not to be overtaken by external pressures. We cannot underestimate the importance of such habits. One of the many sober facts I learned serving on a task force on teen pregnancy in America is just how many of the young girls who become mothers while they themselves are but children, told researchers that they felt pressured into early sex; that they thought something was wrong with them if they didn't 'go all the way' because everyone was doing it and, even more tragic, that at least some of them thought that having a little baby would give them something to really love and that would love them back, for many of these young women suffer from a lack of committed love.

If you would understand a people, look at what unites them as the shared objects of collective love and desire. Look, too, Augustine and other great moral teachers have taught us, on whether we are being formed to distinguish the more from the less worthy, the noble from the ignoble, the complex from the simplistic. But in order to look for what is more worthy, we must be taught. Increasingly, our children learn too many of their cultural lessons from those who approach children from the lowest common denominator, those who define human nature down, those who set up as a mean the voracious self as a normative ideal. Every important task we assign to those who are to do the work of reproducing our culture takes endurance, requires a capacity to distinguish the good from the bad, the high from the low: whether parents, teachers, or public servants. Confronted with the fact that those who are most cynical and turned off about

American civic life are our young people, what do we do? The easy thing to do is to blame the politicians. Far more difficult is to look to ourselves: have we taught our young people about the civic goods realizable only through political effort? Have we conveyed anything of the drama and dignity of political life? Do we teach seriously political rhetoric along longer? We raise kids to the staccato drum-beat of sound-bytes and then we blast politicians when they present their messages to us in sound-bytes. Confronted with a culture in which divorce is the new mean, we point to all sorts of external factors that make it difficult for marriages to work - and we do well to identify such forces - but do we go on to ask the more basic questions: what sorts of people are we creating when marriage, too, is seen as just another entity for maximizing self-satisfaction.

Under such circumstances, it is unsurprising that so many baulk if something deep and more demanding, something requiring both patience and endurance, is expected from them. As soon as you peel back the scrim on any major social problem, you will discover the haunting questions that lie beneath all the others.

Who as a people have we become? What can be reasonably aspire to? How can we limit what we find it destructive without curtailing legitimate political speech and other basic freedoms? How can we create 'safety zones' within which our young people can develop in peace, protected from the full force of a consumerist culture? How can we educate young people to be strong in the face of pressures of all kinds, whether from peers or from advertising? How can we teach young people to value what is most enduring, most basic, most fundamental? How can we break bad cultural habits that seem to be running away with us - or at least with our better sense of who we are and might yet become?

No single document can answer these deep questions. But at least we can put them on the table. The time has come to take a good hard look at ourselves. It will not be fun. It will not be easy. It never is. It takes a bit of stage courage.