

## Reality Isn't Good Enough

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It's the BIG LIE of our day. Few are saying it explicitly, but most of us live it, even if unawares. Today's electronic screen-based culture has cultivated in us an aversion to reality. We need more; either to escape the pain of daily life, or to enhance our images to keep up with everyone else's enhancements. But the more we live in super pseudo-reality, the emptier we become.

I've been following the development of Microsoft's new product called HoloLens. As reported in the New York Times on May 3, 2015, this latest techno magic will "...project images onto lenses in front of people's eyes, adding virtual landscapes and objects on top of the view of the natural world." This sounds like it will be virtual reality *superimposed* on the real world we're looking at. An online article in Fortune on August 3 called HoloLens an "augmented reality headset," and forecast its release within the next year. I'm thinking eventually we'll get so used to the mixture of reality and its augmentations we won't be able to tell what's real and what isn't.

Or maybe we're already there. This new, explicit form of pseudo-reality is simply making clear what has been happening to our minds and perceptions for decades. In our screen-based culture, we can no longer tell for certain what is real. Everything in our screens is so *realistic*, even better than real, we've lost track of the difference. Do we really know what goes on in a crime scene investigation or in the West Wing of the White House? Or do we just think we do because we've seen so much of these places on TV?

As a professional counselor who helps people grapple with the realities of their lives, I've lately been studying this unreality phenomenon of our culture. The title of a 1989 book about television, The Unreality Industry, sums up the impact of our screen culture.

We can live with approximations of reality without noticing it until the difference affects us personally. For instance, we can do just fine with *realistic* perceptions of police investigations or court-rooms—things we see a lot in prime time—because we're rarely in one. But where we require accuracy of perception the most, and experience the most warping of reality from our

screens, is in relationships. Our misperceptions in relationships, and the resulting loss of trust, are bringing us a lot of pain and anxiety.

I watch a married couple in my office, Brad and Susan, talking past each other with agendas and expectations which don't seem to be about the two human beings in front of me, but about culturally programmed perceptions. I wonder if they could answer the questions: What is a man? What is a woman? What are real, healthy relationships and families like? Even in a society of abundant data, we're foggy on such crucial things.

The coarsening and increasingly violating nature of relationships in our society should tell us our perceptions are way off. I see more couples in my counseling office who have married a "comfort object" rather than a real human being. Consequently, many relationships I see have more of the dynamics of bumper cars at an amusement park than love. The end result is often a narcissistic demanding from one another rather than real love. Just like on TV.

The trouble is, we love our unreality. According to Nielsen ratings, the average American adult spends 5 hours per day watching screens for entertainment. And those numbers keep increasing. But unreality will never get us to true joy and happiness. It only provides temporary, if nearly omnipresent, escape. It replaces time we could have spent getting to know one another. And it hooks our brains with captivating stimulation, like a drug. We become trapped and lonely in our own clever escapes.

We do need respite from the overload of horrors we're aware of in the world today. We do need some way of transcending the evil. But we were meant to get that respite and peace from a source other than magical unreality. What our cultural substitutes for reality are doing is providing substitutes for God. This is where we must begin if we want to renew our relationships. Jesus bled real blood at the hands of real Roman soldiers to give us the ability to deal with reality. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the center of reality. True faith, hope and love are all about reality.

When I help people break out of their false comforts I often see suffering; suffering which our culture tells us is unnecessary. So the big lie hides a life-giving truth: we can only find real life and love if we face reality, and we can only face reality with the help of God. God is the loving, transcending presence we're really after when we seek solace in our screens. Jesus said "You

will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” The road of truth and real life is not the “easier way” hawked by media conglomerates.

When the latest techniques for glossing reality are rolled out in impressive advertising campaigns, the implication is that magic is the way to happiness. Reality isn’t good enough. But magic solutions only lead to confusion, blindness, captivity, and loneliness. Keeping our minds and hearts free from the encroaching unrealities of our screen-based culture will be perhaps the biggest spiritual and mental health issue of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

What’s *your* relationship with reality?

Peter Schmidt is a professional counselor who lives and works in Virginia. His book about the media and relationships is called:

HOW DID LOVE BECOME A REALITY SHOW?  
THE DESTRUCTION OF INTIMACY IN A CULTURE BUILT ON *IMAGE*.

The book is available at [Lulu.com](http://Lulu.com)