

Bible or Bar Stool?

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People are quick to justify their personal choices or habits by explaining their past. Abusive father has led to the ultimate destruction of their marriage. Absent mother has forced them to look for comfort in the arms of many lovers. An impoverished youth has led them to bury themselves in their career, eliminating their chance to search for a soul mate. Growing up affluent has led to their continued need to gamble away their horrid family fortune. While the circumstances and the behaviors vary, one thing does not- a need for a relief from reality. Reality does not discriminate. No socio-economic tier, ethnicity, social class, religion or political principles are safe from reality. So why is this? Why do we find ourselves staring through the bottom of an empty glass, feeling the too familiar burn in our mouth instead of going home to face the pain we try to wash away? Or in my experience- why do we mindlessly scroll down our twitter feed instead of picking up the newspaper and reading something that has the potential to affect lives? After watching the constant decision to reach for numb relief instead of bitter medicine, I began to wonder, have we become a society that is so consumed in hiding in liberation, we neglect reality altogether? Each man's addiction, from the bottle to the Bible, is no longer simply something that destroys our relationships or leads to a counterproductive life style, but it has transcended into global affairs. We see this every time we turn on the television or pick up a news article. Like most people, I refer back to my early youth- I begin to question why my childhood was filled with false extreme importance placed on reality TV shows like *The Bachelor* and my family dinners filled with conversations about what my step-mother read in gossip magazines like 'OK!' instead of what we read in actual books. Knowing this phenomenon occurs not only in my home, but also in homes around the country and around the world. I was drawn to ask what deliverance do we find in media and why? Is this relief found in reality TV and tabloids addictive? Is some form of addiction needed to keep us sane- even if it is reading about Chelsea Clinton's latest alien abduction in the grocery line?

"Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of the soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."¹ Before I begin to suggest the opiates in our world today- I want to take a moment to really define what an opiate is. According to the Drug Administration of America, opiates "reduce the intensity of pain signals reaching the brain and affect those brain areas controlling emotion, which dominates the effect of painful stimulus."² When most people hear the word "opiate" they imagine junkies hiding in dark alleyways with belts strapped around their arms, shaking to plunge the syringe filled with a dark brown solution into their bulging vein. I am asking you to remember the actual definition of opiates for the remainder of this paper. I am asking you to forget the dark alleyway.

I grew up in a home that teaches religion as something necessary to life. My family has always instilled the values of Christianity, more specifically a home that instilled Christ as someone to include in my daily life, Jesus Christ as a man with all the answers. We should never question Jesus Christ. Christianity will save us all. I've been taught that we shouldn't worry, because Christ will always be there to save us- to give us strength, to save us from ourselves. My youth was filled with the rephrasing of the same statement: We need Christ in order to be alright. Sound familiar? If the word Christ was replaced with 'drugs' in most sentences we would dismiss those statements with the justification they were coming out of the mouth of a drug

¹ "Marx and the Sacred." *James Luchte Philosophy*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2014.
Jose Miranda, Marx and the Bible, 53-67.

² "Prescription Drug Abuse." *How Do Opioids Affect the Brain and Body?* N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2014.

addict. We would justify that drug addicts run to their drug of choice to hide from the world. Marx is simply saying the people have religion for the same reason people have drugs. He is suggesting that there is more than one thing people turn to, religion is simply another thing people hide under. Charles Kingsley, the canon of Church of England in 1798, takes this notion a step further stating, “ We have used the Bible as if it were a mere special constable’s handbook, an opium dose for keeping beast of burden patient while they were being overloaded, a mere book to keep the poor in order.”³ Kingsley’s assertion is proof of his belief that religion is just a tool to distract all the people from feeling the true sting of socio-economic-political unrest that gives rise to rebellion against injustice. He blatantly calls the Bible an “opium” dose, or something that gives a sense of relief and reduces the sense of pain, more specifically reduces the possibility of reacting to pain. Religion is just another piece of the puzzle, a puzzle that weaves together people from every background possible with their method of disconnection from the discomfort of reality- their vice either prescribed or programmed, allows society to function slightly sedated. Is it wrong that people are religious? Is it wrong that they distract themselves from harsh realities?

“Populations such as youth, older adults and women may be at particular risk”.⁴ According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) these particular populations are at high risk of developing an addiction to opiates. However, if we think to the time in our lives where religion became part of us- most think of adolescence- in the height of our developing minds, we thirst for knowledge, and we are introduced to rigid structures of authority and laws to live by. Or, the mid-life crisis when the need for anything to numb the pain of a meaningless life consumes and a sudden turn to religion occurs. These are the times when we look for something to believe in. While this statistic applies to those who are susceptible to opiate abuse, we can clearly see that it also applies to those who are most susceptible to finding religion, or another escape. Four point five billion people identify with one of the worlds’ four largest religions.⁵ In 2013 alone, 180 million people smoked marijuana, two point four million Americans abused prescription drugs and over 35 million people have used Prozac in the past 20 years.⁴ What do these large numbers mean? Do they mean bored housewives have become more bored? Or angst fueled teenagers have become more experimental? No, we have an increased need to live in a sedated state- an increased demand to be relieved of reality. On the other hand, the production of these sedatives is on the rise. Why? The demand for these ‘saving graces’ has increased exponentially. So is it the industry’s quest to continue to sedate the masses is increasing leading to an escalating need among society to live in increasingly sedated state? Or is it the other way around? Either way we are trapped in an opium merry-go round- trapped between the industry throwing new sedatives into the masses of people searching for a relief from their reality instead of a change in it. But, in the end, is it our business to take the Prozac out of society’s Kool-Aid, or to bring the Church to the ground under the principal that it is a retreat from real world problems?

Maybe some people cannot relate to the addiction to religion or drugs; but everyone has a vice. Those who hide in the Bible may only harm themselves by closing their minds. Those who hide in tranquilizers may only harm their health and relationships. I’ve posed these questions to

³ "The Journal of Cognitive Liberties." *The Journal of Cognitive Liberties*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2014.

⁴ "Prescription Drug Abuse." *How Do Opioids Affect the Brain and Body?* N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2014.

⁵ "The Global Religious Landscape." *Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project RSS*. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Apr. 2014.

ask you to think on them. However, the next part of my discovery is something that all can relate to. An opiate that we all indulge in- an opiate we rarely accept the consequences of. Mass media- the new opium of the masses. "We have built in allergy to unpleasant or disturbing information. Our mass media reflects this... we (must) get off our fat surpluses and recognize that television is the main tool being used to distract, delude, amuse and insult us...."⁶ Edward Murrow, an broadcast journalist during WWII, warned. Today when we turn on the TV, are we consenting to this supposed distraction, delusion and insult? The proof that television has truly become an addictive substance is undeniable and frightening. Herbert Krugman conducted a series of experiments where groups from various socio-economic classes stopped watching TV. For the first experiment, families were asked to stop watching TV for one month. Easy, right? No. The poorest families all gave in after one week because of depression. Other families reported they suffered severe depression and felt like they "had lost a friend."⁷ The next experiment was conducted with 182 individuals offered a paid incentive if they could last a single year without television. None lasted more than five months. What commentary does this offer about our society? Earlier, I defined how opiates worked- the blocking of pain sensors to our brain. Keeping that in mind, let's discuss how television affects us. When we watch TV our higher brain region (neo-cortex) shuts down and the activity moves to the lower brain (Cognitive function). Our brain cannot differentiate these images that we are being shown from reality so the brain reacts like it is real life. Extended periods of this leads to atrophy in the higher brain regions.⁸ So yes, television quite literally rots your brain. The newest opiate of the masses affects more than just your brain, it is a threat to our social order. 75% of women think they are overweight. By 18, the average American has seen 200,000 violent acts. 79 % of people believe TV violence helps them precipitate real life mayhem. 6 hours, 47 minutes is the average time the television is on in the average household. 57% of 4-6 year olds chose to spend time watching TV over spending time with their fathers. 60% of our population can name the three stooges, in contrast to the 14% who can name two Justices of the Supreme Court.⁹ These statistics should scare us. We should be scared of our children that are addicted to being doped up with television before they are even given a chance to experience the sting of reality. It is equipping an entire generation with an addiction to escape, an addiction to fall back on when they are feeling discomfort. Previously, when generations are raised in situations of socio-political- economic inequality they rise against the injustice and create change. We should fear for the generation that goes through the world happily sedated. TV has become just another drug prescribed to refocus the masses on petty drama instead of inequality. Heavy TV viewers exhibit two dependency symptoms more than necessary to arrive at substance abuse: 1) using as a sedative; 2) indiscriminate viewing; 3) feeling a loss of control while viewing; 4) feeling angry with oneself for watching too much; 5) inability to stop watching; or 6) feeling miserable when kept from watching.¹⁰ If we saw anyone exhibiting these symptoms for a drug we would attribute this to their inability to control their own minds as a result of drug use. TV audiences have lost control of their minds as well, "Commercials, for example, are designed to implant moods in consumers

⁶ "A Report on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy". *See it Now*. March 9, 1954. CBS. Retrieved 2011-05-16.

⁷ "Television: Opiate of the People." *Time*. Time Inc., 15 July 1957. Web. 23 Apr. 2014.

⁸ "The Idiot Box: How TV Is Turning Us All Into Zombies." *Prison Planetcom The Idiot Box How TV Is Turning Us All Into Zombies Comments*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2014.

⁹ "Television." *Television*. N.p., n.d. Web. 22 Apr. 2014.

¹⁰ "The Idiot Box: How TV Is Turning Us All Into Zombies." *Prison Planetcom The Idiot Box How TV Is Turning Us All Into Zombies Comments*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2014.

to associate with the product when encountered in real life”¹¹ This means that our thoughts and desires are clouded as a result of our drug. So what is the comfort we find in this vice? Why do we know all of the detrimental effects on society and health that television, as a key part of the mass media, leads to yet we continue to press the power button? Throughout history we have been rescued by our opiates.

In Narcotics Anonymous (NA) you must first come to terms with what your drug of choice brings to your life in order to come to terms with the reality you have been running from. In other words, we must recognize the benefits of our vice. When we think of modern day tabloids we picture the grotesque images of star’s ribs, absurd love children and leaked rehab patient confessions; however, maybe we should think of them as societies saving grace. When you look at the history of tabloids, you might begin to recognize tabloids as the saving grace the society continues to need. The term “tabloid” was trademarked in the 1880s as a word for little pill¹² but by the mid 1930’s celebrity gossip was well on its way to the 3 billion dollar a year industry it has become today. Broadway Brevities was the first tabloid in America being launched in 1916. For the first few years it crept along slowly but amongst the chaos of the 1930’s it was “filled with stories of gang warfare traveling orgies, the shadowy queer underworld and girls gone wild in the cities ballrooms and brothels. For the first time, the public had a fix for an addiction it never knew it had.”¹³ This tabloid couldn’t be kept on the shelves at a time in history when most people couldn’t even keep food on the table for their family. “MOB HUSTLES GALS, white slavers trap innocent victims,” “Virgins bring high price in vice mart”, “Students Open Wide! Girls and boys mingle in sin dens”¹⁴ littered the covers of *Brevity* and society loved it. While *Brevities* consumption soared, so did unemployment rates to a rate of 26% percent.¹⁵ One would think amongst the tragedy of the Great Depression people would buckle down and spend their money sparingly only on the necessities; however, *Brevities*’ success shows us otherwise. People needed to hide away in a time of Great Depression. Comics such as Superman, Flash Gordon and Dick Tracy were popular among children, for they offered a similar relief that so many searched for. The children of the depression had their superhero’s to believe in, and the adults their “Chain Sin Soars” articles. Addiction allows escape, an outlet in which we can feel free of the troubles that choke us in everyday life.

This paper is not meant to provide answers. Nor is it meant to prescribe life style changes. This paper is meant to advocate realization. It is meant to bring attention to all of our escapes from reality. Whether we choose a Bible or a barstool we are making a choice to disconnect. We must be conscious of our vices, even if it is clothed as a virtue. All my life I have watched people label right and wrong. The Christian Church is right, but Islam is wrong. We pray to the right God, but they do not know God. Our good deeds get us into heaven; theirs do not out shine their disbelief in the Resurrection. Light beer all day is okay, but tequila means you’re an alcoholic. My vice is justified, but theirs is a result of their poor judgment. We can live our lives happily drugged by our opiates, rather if they come in a syringe or a scroll, we can allow them to keep us happily sedated. But then isn’t that giving them power? How can we point a finger at those who chose to spend their nights surrounded by bright lights and dollar bills

¹² "The \$3 Billion Celebrity Gossip Industry: By the Numbers." *The Week*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2014.

¹³ "Lies, Damned Lies and Tabloid Statistics ..." *Thought Leader*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2014.

¹⁴ "Lies, Damned Lies and Tabloid Statistics ..." *Thought Leader*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2014.

¹⁵ "The 1930s." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, n.d. Web. 20 Apr. 2014.

each night instead of returning home, while we drowned our dull marriages in Prozac and bad reality TV series? Despite the locations, we are equally hiding from the truth. We may be able to find relief in our opiates and with this relief we may justify our addictions or we may accept them. Some rot their brains using hard drugs- others chose television. Who are we to label opiates as wrong? Who are we to judge other's escapes?