

Camille De Blasi looks at the reasons for the Western world's cultural demise

# How to heal the CULTURE

The good news is that Western culture is not terminally ill. It is just critically sick.

There's little doubt that Western culture is starving to death. In ten years of professional pro-life education, I have observed large numbers of young people who think the elderly have a duty to die, elderly people who think the unborn are a threat to global health, and healthy people who think the sick and disabled would be better off dead. The trouble with our culture seems to be a spiritual ignorance about who we are and what human beings are meant for. People are not able to understand the meaning of suffering if they do not sense that they are made in the image and likeness of a God who created them to share in his life-giving and love-giving legacy. Instead of viewing suffering as a profound opportunity to share more fully in the mystery of self-gift, they perceive it as debilitating, embarrassing, humiliating, undignified and useless. In turn, they resent a God who allows it and convince themselves that compassion means avoidance of suffering at all costs. That's precisely what abortion, euthanasia, cloning, and destructive stem cell research seek to do. Healing will only come through a conversion of the heart concerning what we, as a culture, are living for.

In his groundbreaking book, *Healing the Culture, A Commonsense Philosophy of Happiness, Freedom, and the Life Issues*, Robert J. Spitzer, President of Gonzaga University, offers a guide to effective pro-life education by looking to the four basic desires within the human soul which motivate what we do and how we live.<sup>1</sup>

The first human desire is for *physical pleasure*. It can be immediately satisfied, uses very little of our human powers to fulfill, and is necessary for existence. While there is nothing wrong with physical pleasure in itself, a person who makes it his *raison d'être* will soon become unsatisfied. He will sense that he is radically

under-living his life. This is the soul's way of indicating that there are deeper powers to the human nature yet unfulfilled.

The desire for 'something more' is the catalyst for awakening our second human desire: *ego-drive* or the desire to create a self-identity through comparison, competition, success, popularity, recognition, power and control. While there's nothing wrong objectively with it, pursuing ego-gratification as one's final end will make life fraught with jealousy, anxiety, suspicion, fear, aggression, obsessive compulsions, contempt for others and even self-hatred.

Many philosophers point out that the solution to this crisis is to look beyond the self to the needs of others. This third desire – to *contribute* and enter into communion with one another – can lead to some of

## Keeping

I couldn't do without 'to do' lists. Recently, I read an interesting list for growing older! Written by a Harvard medical school professor, 'Aging Well – Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life' suggests the following:

- don't smoke
- adopt an adaptive coping style
- avoid alcohol abuse
- maintain a healthy weight
- keep stability in marriage
- look out for the younger generation
- exercise regularly
- complete an education<sup>1</sup>

the greatest moments of common cause. It can also lead to some of the darkest moments of despair as we quickly become idealists.

The trouble is that we begin to seek fulfillment not in mere love but in perfect, absolute, infinite and unconditional Love. If a person tries to fulfill this desire with imperfect, finite human beings, he will experience inevitable frustration and dashed expectations. On the other hand, if he responds to this desire by entertaining a *faith* that goes beyond what he can see, then this fourth desire for ultimacy has the potential to lead him to God and the joy that results from entering into relationship with absolute and unconditional Love.

These four levels of happiness - physical, ego, contribution and faith - offer us a key to the crisis of modern man. The culprit seems to be an identity that ignores the ultimate yearnings of the human soul - indeed, ignores the very existence of the soul - and focuses instead on trying to fulfill a spiritual self with material goods and ego-gratification. This attitude can have devastating effects.

Consider a person who has spent a lifetime defining happiness in terms of physical pleasure and ego-gratification. *Success* is defined as independence, control, and avoiding pain and loss; he views disabilities with contempt. *Quality of life* is judged by the ratio of what he has to what he does not have; he may view euthanasia for the terminally ill as liberating. *Love* is equated with lust, admiration, and domination over the other; sex is seen as the satisfaction of his animal appetite. *Suffering* is only useful if it can be controlled, and completely useless if it cannot; consequently he may view abortion in Third World countries as compassionate. *Ethics* entails a calculation of harms and benefits; research on frozen embryos seems like a good ending to a sad story. *Freedom* means escape from externally imposed obligations and commitments; he sees rules against cloning as thwarting scientific advancement. To this person, *rights* and *personhood* have become a Peter Singer-like

description of functions and abilities; he may even call into question partially born and newborn infants. From his perspective, abortion and euthanasia appear to be good answers to human suffering. We cannot change his answers unless we change his viewpoint.

So, let us consider God's point of view. True success doesn't come from the things of this world but from belief in Christ.<sup>2</sup> The quality of our lives is not based on what we have but on the fact that God wants us for himself.<sup>3</sup> Love is not about sensation and control but involves compassion and self-sacrifice.<sup>4</sup> Suffering teaches us to be gentle and humble of heart.<sup>5</sup> Ethics is not cold calculation but is about being true, noble, pure, lovely and admirable.<sup>6</sup> Freedom should be used to serve one another in love.<sup>7</sup> Personhood and rights belong to each one of us from the moment we are created in the womb.<sup>8</sup>

If we want a culture that respects the dignity of all human life, we need to awaken the desire for higher ideals in the individuals that constitute that culture. This can be accomplished in small ways such as speaking with family members, friends and colleagues, leading them to consider deeper levels of human purpose.<sup>9</sup> It can be done in bigger ways such as establishing a corps of hospital volunteers who are trained to help patients find deeper meaning in their suffering.<sup>10</sup> It can also be accomplished in more formal ways: through retreats, lectures, articles, media interviews, public discussions, or classroom activities.<sup>11</sup>

The good news is that Western culture is not terminally ill. It is just critically sick. But it needs desperately to be fed a vision of hope, dignity, love, compassion and faith. There is much to be optimistic about. The human spirit that flounders under the weight of ignorance is also the human spirit that will soar to untold heights when liberated by a vision of its own dignity.

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# Lists

Most of us keep to-do lists. But might we take God's instructions with the same seriousness, wonders **Bob Snyder**

The Bible suggests that God keeps lists as well.

*'There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him:*

*haughty eyes,  
a lying tongue,  
hands that shed innocent blood,  
a heart that devises wicked schemes,  
feet that are quick to rush into evil,  
a false witness who pours out lies and  
a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.'*

(Proverbs 6:16-19)

As we draw up this week's 'to-do' list, let's seriously consider and act upon God's list.

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## References

- 1 Vaillant, GE. *Aging Well: Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life from the Landmark Harvard Study of Adult Development*. London: Little, Brown & Co, 2002



## KEY POINTS

The increasing acceptance of abortion and euthanasia is simply a symptom of spiritual ignorance in our culture. Human desires can be thought of as operating at four levels; physical pleasure, ego-drive, contribution to others and faith. If life is simply seen to be about maximising physical pleasure and gratifying the ego then success, quality of life, suffering and freedom will be viewed within these parameters. But seen through the eyes of faith they take on completely different meanings. If we are to change the way people think about pro-life issues then we must first change the way they think about what it is to be human.

## References

- 1 Spitzer RJ. *Healing the Culture, A Commonsense Philosophy of Happiness, Freedom, and the Life Issues*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000
- 2 1 John 5:1-5
- 3 Matthew 10:29-31; John 10:10
- 4 1 Corinthians 13:4-8; Ephesians 5:25
- 5 Matthew 11:28-30; 2 Corinthians 12:9-10
- 6 Philippians 4:8-9
- 7 Galatians 5:13-26
- 8 Isaiah 49:1; Jeremiah 1:5
- 9 Spitzer RJ. Op Cit
- 10 [www.beingwith.net](http://www.beingwith.net)
- 11 [www.lifepinciples.net](http://www.lifepinciples.net)