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## AT ISSUE

### *Vox Populi*

**T**he same-sex married couple, one of whom has achieved sameness through surgery, are denouncing the biological mother of the child they have adopted. She is fighting them for custody because she has now found steady and responsible work as a topless dancer and no longer lives with the serial killer who is the child's biological father. There they sit, aligned on the stage before cameras and lights more perfectly than they will ever be aligned elsewhere (but for the killer, who is to participate by phone from his cell, thanks to an arrangement with the authorities). The moderator uses her microphone to conduct a chamber symphony of woe, before an audience which has long since learned to listen for the familiar notes and which is prepared, when called upon, to work its own zany riffs on each theme. It's morning in America. And midday. And midnight. And through the TV screen baroque nightmares seep casually into our waking lives.

So what? Are the freak shows of our time really any worse than those the barker hid in his tent? The scale, of course, has changed; our electronic circus tents accommodate millions. Our taste in deformities has changed too; we prefer crippled psyches. What else is new? Well, some significant number of Americans are now willing to expose their private shames and emotional failures, their hurt feelings, their least opinions, to another significant number of Americans willing to watch and listen and add their two cents, or 10 bucks. What was spoken of once in whispers, if at all, or considered not worth saying, is now matter for a public lecture with slides.

In the process, dignity has gone the way of grammar. It seems to have been replaced by self-esteem, which turns out to be not the same thing at all. Neither is it the same as self-respect. We are many miles from the territory staked out by William Faulkner when he told his agent how to handle a request for a bit of biography: "Don't

tell the bastards anything." He was on the right track. We seem determined that the whole nation should have the privacy of a military barracks. Supreme Court decisions turn precariously on invocation of a constitutional right to privacy, and we want that right fiercely guarded. Yet we often behave in daily life as if nothing should be kept private anymore, and no one spared.

It is some comfort to believe that the current infestation of TV and radio shows trading in curiosity, unbridled talk, ignorant opinion, and loopy emotions will simply die out, of exhaustion and self-parody, when these programs have nothing left to feed on. But the near-term prognosis is not encouraging: The landscape still looks awfully green, a money-color green, and millions of Americans are hooked. Is the phenomenon worth taking seriously? Is high fever an index of disease?

Two aspects of these shows are particularly troubling. In their fixation on exposure, the more sensational the better, under a pretense that to know all is to understand all and, *hopefully* (the word in all its insistent misuse is the favored mantra of hosts, victims, accusers, and audiences alike), forgive all, they promote an attitude toward the world that undermines dignity, belief, and trust. In their glorification of unchecked opinion in the service of medicine-show nostrums, they debase thought and speech itself.

**B**ut wait. Aren't we better off free of the puritanical constraints that made hypocrites of our ancestors, and the illusions that made them fools? One would like to think so, even against the evidence. Now we are all adults here, including the kids, and what monster—psychic, social, cultural, political, sexual—can we not face head-on and domesticate, maybe over coffee? Even before Oprah, Terence had the right idea. "I am human," he said, "and nothing human is foreign to

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me." (Or might Terence have had second thoughts these days?) We can stare down all our demons and put them on leashes, to air and display when we choose. (And, incidentally, my private devil is uglier than yours.)

**T**he exposé, of course, is a time-honored exercise. What is new is that so many people seem hell-bent not just on exposing others (and their vengeance usually begins at home) but on self-exposure. They are so desperate to talk that they will say the most appalling things, even about themselves. There is no zone from which they would bar others: this far and no farther. What has happened to the citizen who keeps his own counsel, and his dignity, who does not just say no but says nothing? The realm of the properly private has been narrowed to the distances between radio bands and remote-control buttons. "I hear America singing," sang the poet; he should be glad he did not live to hear America talking.

The fundamental issue is not prurience, though prurience is the attraction that is always held over for an extra week. These shows will take on any topic: politics, war, world hunger, race hatred, body fat, extraterrestrial traffic, cosmetic surgery. Nothing is too trivial that it can't be handled, and nothing is too important either. In the end, the topics find a common level—and this is what is most disturbing—reduced by the TV screen, the staged circumstances, and the endless chatter, by so little thought in the service of so many feelings to a like significance.

Sometimes the leveling is accomplished through exposure and revelation, as when the famous are brought low (to the level of the audience) or when an entire dysfunctional family is made to face facts and implodes. Sometimes it is implicit in the very nature of the proceedings: Every view counts, no matter how dumb. We have dropped through the floor into some dank, crowded subbasement of democracy where every tongue is urged to flutter and every opinion is accorded equal value and where ignorance held in common passes for group wisdom.

These shows are but one symptom of the mania for revelation that afflicts the country. Though not one person in a thousand could

identify Tacitus, we have been trained to a surprisingly Tacitean view of the world, which regards the surface of daily life, in and out of imperial circles, as mostly sham. We expect camouflage and conspiracy and routine deception, by private citizens (the model father, e.g., who admits finally to being the town pyromaniac) and by public figures (the star quarterback who can no longer conceal his addiction). The unmasking in due course has the inevitability, and the satisfaction, of ritual. There is less risk in being hugged by a python than in being embraced by the public. First we celebrate what is exceptional about artists, actors, poets, statesmen, athletes, warriors, popes, guardians of civil order, promoters of social justice. In time we press the breath right out of them.

We won't be fooled again, not by Christopher Columbus or Thomas Jefferson or even Rock Hudson. We are beyond the need for sustaining myths (except for being sustained by the myth that we do not need them). We will have no more John Kennedys, for example. To Kennedy's death and its aftermath can be traced the beginnings of the country's long slide, quickened by the events of subsequent decades, into doubt and suspicion, about politics and government, at least. Kennedy himself would certainly be given a more difficult time under current conditions, and his evasive tactics would need to be a lot more sophisticated for him to escape the forms of scrutiny we now take for granted. But who knows? If he confessed to Phil or Larry or Joan and asked for understanding (perhaps as one of several "CEOs Who Lived Beyond the Rules"), and took questions from the audience, we might find it in our hearts to forgive. And if Paris was worth a Mass, the presidency must be worth Larry King.

**C**oleridge once defined dignity as "the absence of ludicrous and debasing associations." We have become as careless of our associations as of our traditions. Surely something is wrong when we accept, and perhaps expect, that a politician in high office, or aspiring to high office, will occupy the same chair, within the same TV frame, as the thieving executive, the chastened rapist, the defensive cross-dresser, the parent-divorcing child,

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the child-divorcing parent, the poseur rock star, and the overvalued athlete, to make a case—in that context proper to pop-psych moralizing and shabby emotional display—for some matter meant to be taken seriously. This is presumably a way of reaching the people. No matter that in the process personal dignity, institutional dignity, and national dignity are all diminished.

Talk shows are not the only contributors to the national din. Americans are being urged from many quarters to speak out and speak up, when they might better be sent to sit in the corner for a while. The pollster's questions read our slippery moods like a CAT scanner: Should McDonald's serve pizza? Should the government serve health care? Would you be willing to pay more for a slightly bigger cookie? Are you in favor of armed intervention if no one will get hurt?

These are equally issues on which we are asked to have opinions, and having made our opinions known, we expect to have them regarded. The fate of the hamburger is of passing interest, but if government turns skittish and bends to each pollster's reading of public preference, it does no service to democracy, which cannot survive continual indulgence. Rather than hold to a core of unshakable belief and endure the consequences, too many politicians go limp as new balloons until inflated with the hot air of public opinion. This passes for responsiveness when it is really only self-preservation. And

even as it is indulged, the public loses respect for its easy leaders, who maneuver themselves farther from esteem—and are called to account on the air.

**G**ravity for us has mostly to do with physics, but the Latin word from which our word derives, *gravitas*, carries a richer association of meanings, of "weight" and "heaviness" not just in a physical sense but in a moral sense as well—seriousness of temperament, conduct, and speech, and the dignity and authority that one wins as a consequence. To be famous for your *gravitas* was to enjoy a high reputation. In our day, when we no longer forge links to the past but keep hold of it with adhesive tape at best, it may be pointless to bring up the Romans. But it is gravity in the Roman sense that is missing from too much of our social, political, and cultural life, an awareness of the proper dignity and proportion to be observed in the performance of every act of life.

Debasing associations abound and work their harm. Yet what is to be done? Perhaps the disease will simply have to run its course, and its ravages bring us to our senses. In the meantime, modest remedies might relieve some of the symptoms. Raymond Carver once used as the title of a short story a request that should now be made at large: *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* Well, it's a beginning. Hopefully.