

THE YUPPIE PARADOX

By Ross Bishop

An introductory note: If you have read Truth, you know that I hold a deep concern for the direction that some parts of our society are taking. I am particularly concerned about what we are doing to our kids. What follows is a critical look at a part of Anglo-American culture.

I know you've seen it – maybe it's you - a nice house in a good neighborhood, a couple of kids, 2 cars, the right clothes and politically correct views. From the outside things look "normal" but on the inside, it is a very different story. Melancholy beneath the gloss. The family is doing "OK" but no one is really happy. Life is something to be endured rather than enjoyed. As Thoreau observed, "lives of quiet desperation." This is not a new phenomenon. David Myers put it well when he wrote in Yes! Magazine:

Since 1957, the number of Americans who say they are "very happy" has declined slightly, from 35 to 30 percent. We are twice as rich and no happier. Meanwhile, the divorce rate has doubled, the teen suicide rate has more than doubled, and increasingly our teens and young adults are plagued by depression.

. . . More than ever, we at the end of the last century were finding ourselves with big houses and broken homes, high incomes and low morale, secured rights and diminished civility. We were excelling at making a living but too often failing at making a life. We celebrated our prosperity but yearned for purpose. We cherished our freedoms but longed for connection. In an age of plenty, we were feeling spiritual hunger.

Myers wrote in another article:

"Materialism surged during the 1970s and 1980s. The proportion of entering collegians considering it "very important or essential" that they become "very well off financially" skyrocketed from 40 to 74 percent."

From 40 to 74 percent in a decade! All I can say is "Wow!" In 1975, asked by Roper pollsters to identify what makes "the good life," 38 percent of Americans said "a lot of money." That number grew to 63 percent by 1996. Materialism was up, spirituality was down. If you want to find the sinkhole we fell into, there it is.

So what is The Yuppie Paradox? It means abandoning the truth for materialistic goals and then working like hell to compensate for the resulting spiritual emptiness. The most universal characteristic is unresolved childhood pain, which has been turned to symbolic status and "notice me" narcissism as compensation.

These people live on or near the surface. They cling to appearances and possessions. No one tells the truth. They have social friendships, follow social causes, are involved in community affairs, practice political correctness, have a nice home, a well-kept lawn, and fashionable cars. They both work, and life is held together by effort. She does yoga or Pilates, he plays golf or tennis,

and they go to dinner with friends. They are active, athletic, and constantly pressed for time.

They have both chosen careers that do not speak to their hearts, but they get "status compensation." In their career choices, the couple exhibits another of the critical factors of the yuppie paradox: rationalization. If you are going to move away from the God-space, you must find some way to justify the decisions you have made. We all rationalize, but these Yuppies have perfected rationalization to the level of high art.

To live the Yuppie Paradox is to live a lie. Both parents have a prohibition against dealing with their deep inner issues, even though the wife may be in therapy. There is an unspoken contract in the relationship that core inner issues are not to be addressed. In fact, the tension that these issues generate is part of the dysfunctional glue that holds the relationship together. The surface veneer is love, honesty, and sensitivity – to a point. It's called conditional love.

Adults struggling under The Yuppie Paradox must expend enormous amounts of personal energy to hold the façade together. This is why their health and families so often fail.

Every family will differ from this general image, and of course, there are a thousand shades of grey. Certainly not all Yuppie parents are inept and not all Yuppie families are soulless. Every family circumstance is unique. However, many of these values have become so pervasive throughout society that we are all affected by them. I am painting with a very wide brush to give you an idea of the dynamics of the Paradox. I will address couples in this article, but a great many singles fall into this syndrome as well.

The obligatory children brought into this relationship come into an emotional nightmare. Told that they are loved, (and they are to a point), the children have difficulty finding substance beneath the veneer. They do not lack for material needs, but they feel empty. It is crazy-making. They know something is wrong, but cannot put their finger on what it is. They go through life emotionally starved. It is no wonder these kids are angry, hurting, and rebellious. Drugs provide a refuge.

The Yuppie Paradox occurs all over America, but this phenomenon has a particular concentration in the suburbs around Denver. I did not find it coincidental that the Columbine High School Massacre occurred in the Denver suburb of Littleton. In my judgment, it was created by The Yuppie Paradox.

On the surface Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the Columbine killers, weren't all that different from the other kids in the community. They certainly did not draw extra attention from their parents, teachers, principals, their friends, or neighbors.

Even though they had 15 run-ins with the police and had been caught trying to steal tools from a van, no one saw anything so out of the ordinary about these kids that it caused alarm. And that, for me, is the scary part. No one saw their pain as anything unusual. In interview after interview, neighbors, teachers, and friends describe the families as normal.

That expresses the denial that is another essential part of The Yuppie Paradox. No one dares see the truth beneath the manicured lawns because it

would unravel the social fabric on which the Yuppie social structure is based. In addition to the run-ins with the police, and the attempted tool theft, these kids made explosives in the basement; and in their rooms had 99 pipe bombs, an assortment of weapons and ammunition, 5 propane tanks and 2 propane bombs – and their parents didn't notice that anything was wrong.

Eric Harris' web site was filled with violent invective, but no one, not his parents, not the police, not the judge or the juvenile probation officer, took the time to look beneath the surface. The parents even found a toolkit with completed pipe bombs in it once, and they simply removed the pipe bombs.

This situation sounds extreme, and of course, it is. In hindsight, everything becomes clear, but something was terribly wrong in that community system. But it's not just Littleton. The same influences can be found in many other communities across the country. And, kids don't have to conduct a massacre to be seriously hurting. We failed Harris and Klebold and the kids they killed and injured. We failed miserably. We did not do our job as a community of loving friends. My concern about our kids today is that no one is taking the time to listen to them and take their feelings seriously.

When Columbine exploded, activists with political axes to grind jumped on the media, video games, the NRA, the schools and just about everything else in sight. Blame flowed freely. The NRA, showing no shame, had the gall to assert that if teachers and students had been allowed to carry firearms, the massacre would have been prevented. Political hubris knows no limit.

It can be argued that all of these factors were contributory. It's way too easy to get guns, rap music is very violent, Marilyn Manson should probably be banned and someone should regulate video game violence, but none of these factors were causal. The really sad thing is that no one it seemed, wanted to look at the values of middle class, Anglo American Yuppie society as the critical, determining, factor. Jon Kurtz of Slashdot.com wrote of the spate of school shootings:

What do we know about these horrible eruptions? Almost all of the killers have been white, teenaged males who are emotionally disturbed. Almost all lived in suburban or rural areas, the children of working or middle-class families. They've been generally described as well parented.

And, in almost every single case, nobody really knows why they did what they did. They suffered various forms of social cruelty and exclusion, as so many of their peers also have, and they got their hands on especially lethal weaponry, particularly guns. Almost always, their friends, classmates, and teachers are stunned and disbelieving. Some of the shooters have been avid media and computer users. Others weren't.

More relevant questions might be: Why are so many of these killers male and middle-class, rather than the poor or the underclass? Why do these assaults occur almost exclusively in rural or suburban areas? Why are these kids able to hide even severe emotional disturbance from the people closest to them?

Why indeed? In another article, Kurtz asks why in Canada, where kids are subjected to an almost identical media environment with video games, MTV, etc. there has never been a school shooting? Are our kids the problem, or is it us?

I remember a post-Columbine interview with a member of Congress who came from the South. The Congressman spoke about his school days, when boys would go hunting after school. He assayed as how on any given day there would have been enough guns in car trunks in the school parking lot to start a small war, but that no one would have ever thought of bringing a gun into the school. No Yuppie Paradox.

In the 1960's, young people had the draft and the War in Viet Nam to rail against. It gave them a focus to dump their angst and frustration. Presidents Nixon and Lyndon Johnson made perfect establishment foils. I have wondered what would have happened back then if the draft had not existed. But, kids occupied university administrative offices in those days, and about the most violent thing they did was to leave pizza stains on the carpet.

Another important symptom of the Yuppie Paradox to consider is religion. It seems that the spiritual emptiness of the lifestyle drives Yuppies to evangelical religious movements. Littleton, where Columbine High School is located, has twice as many evangelicals as Catholics, a complete reversal of the national pattern. The Promise Keepers are headquartered just ten miles from Columbine High in Denver. Focus on the Family operates 50 miles south in Colorado Springs, and the Regional Mormon Headquarters Temple that serves several western states, is located right in Littleton. A false god serves no one.

At the heart of Yuppie materialism is the old game of substituting possessions for love, and even if at some level they know it won't work, they feel that it's better than the alternative of going inside and facing their personal hell. I want to be careful to not blame The Yuppie Paradox on having possessions. Greed and materialism have been with us for a very long time, but Yuppie culture has turned materialism into a cause celebre. Hiding behind net worth just happens to be the most common method these people use to compensate. But, it is the deeper motives and needs that are important here. There is nothing wrong with having nice things and a comfortable income. We do however have to be careful of our desire for possessions, because it is such a potentially slippery place. To be fair, the Earth Mother, granola munching, Birkenstock crowd can be as tied to their "anti-establishment" attitudes as the Yuppies are to material world.

Because the Yuppie social structure is built on sand, when it collapses, as it must, these people are left in considerable pain. The thing they fear most, their inner inadequacies, have suddenly been exposed for the world to see. They fear that they will be overwhelmed by it all.

When a Yuppie's world starts to fall apart, many of them seek therapy. The marriage has never been really good, the kids are getting into trouble or using drugs, or they seek therapy simply because they are fed up with an unhappy and unsatisfying life. In most cases, these people are unaware of what the universe is really asking of them. They want to patch the holes in the dike and get their carefully crafted lives back together without addressing the deep inner pain that they have avoided their entire life. The universe however, has another agenda, and it will be relentless in pursuing it.

No matter where you start on the wheel of life, as you move toward the center you end up with issues of self-love. That is certainly true with the Yuppie Paradox. The core issue to all the problems these people face is that they do not love themselves and therefore cannot give real love to their partners or their children.

Bill Clinton, Martha Stewart, Ken Lay, and thousands of other Yuppies with stock options see themselves as an elite aristocracy. The neo-conservative Cheney-Bush administration is in a class by itself when it comes to the arrogance of power. If you are really successful, you are above the law. This is an example of the one-upmanship that this lifestyle generates. This sort of aristocratic arrogance has not been seen since Marie Antoinette and the Bourgeoisie that led to the French Revolution.

But, these people are beyond your reach. What can you do? First, look at yourself and your life. Have you bought into the Yuppie world? Are you willing to step out of it? Do your kids feel that they can talk to you about anything and everything? It might be a good idea to ask them, and listen to what they do not say. If you and your kids are OK, what about their friends? It's not sticking your nose in somebody else's business to help a kid who is on the edge. It 's part of our obligation to each other.