CHAPTER TWO

THE RESEARCH WORKSHOP

Traditionally, literacy has referred to being able to read and write in a specific langage. Religious communities have moved beyond that definition to speak of "religious literacy," by which they usually mean being able to worship with some degree of knowledge and understanding, and being able to interpret sacred texts and traditions within the lifeway of a specific community. In both of these cases what educators usually mean by "literacy" is more than simply a limited ability to take something in, to read a sign, for instance, or to recite a creed. Instead we are actually seeking something that might more appropriately be called "fluency," or the ability to read and write, to worship and interpret, with ease, knowledge, and grace.

In the context of a mass-mediated commercial culture such as our late 20th century U.S. culture, literacy and religious literacy are further complicated by the necessity of being able to "read" and "interpret" visual texts that are electronically communicated (tv, film, and so on). Indeed, the New London Group[40] has started to speak and write in terms of "multiliteracies," which term attempts to capture not only the diversity of "modes" of communication (traditional print, hypertext, multi-media, and so on), but also the diversity of cultural referrants. "Multiliteracy," in

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[40] The "New London Group" is a group of literacy educators from around the world who have gathered regularly to discuss emerging issues in the field (see the article for the entire list of co-authors).

this framework, "emphasizes how negotiating the multiple linguistic and cultural differences in our society is central to the pragmatics of [our] working, civic, and private lives" (New London Group, 1996, p. 60). We need to be able to live and work and play in a diversity of cultures, and do so in representational forms as well as in written forms.

For the purposes of this project I have defined "media literacy" very broadly as being able to read (broadly construed to include visual imagery) all forms of media and use them to actively write one's life (again broadly construed).[41] Several assumptions underlie this definition. First, media literacy has to do with learning how to engage a particular medium actively, rather than receive or consume it passively. Second, this kind of active engagement requires knowing something about how media work: how they are funded, what their primary grammar is, and so on. Third, what "media literacy" consists in or of will vary depending on the context one is speaking about, although a basic ability to engage media critically should cross cultural lines.

Communication studies range across a variety of disciplines, and have proven to be more and less useful to media educators.[42] The kinds of

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[41] This definition relies in large part on Freirean notions of "conscientization" which include "challenging students to critically engage with their world so they can act about it and on it." For more on this idea, see in particular Freire & Macedo (1995, p. 391).

[42] While communications studies that focus on "how" to implement specific media are, of course, read within the media literacy movement, the movement has tried to move beyond what Hoover (1995, p. 6) calls an "instrumentalist" view of the media. This same desire to avoid seeing media solely as instruments that we use for our own purposes, or as instruments solely of oppression, has moved media literacy educators away from the research that has generated reams of statistics on viewing patterns. Instead media educators are increasingly reliant on what is usually termed "reception" or "audience reception" theorizing, particularly that coming out of a

scholarship that media literacy educators generally turn to are increasingly being labelled "cultural studies" in communication, because they seek to attend to the ways in which the mass media form and inform, deform and transform, cultures (whether those cultures are microcultures within specific ethnic neighborhoods, or mass commercialized cultures of entertainment, and so on). Cultural studies scholars have asked three particular kinds of questions about the popular mass media: how they frame our understanding of the world, how they "set our agendas," and how people pay attention to the media.[43]

The Center for Media Literacy in California, author and supporter of the *Catholic Connections to Media Literacy* curriculum used in this research, draws from such research a series of what they term "media literacy principles":[44]

> 1) media construct reality, 2) media use unique languages, 3) audiences 'negotiate meaning,' 4) media have commercial interests, and 5) media have embedded values and points of view' (O'Brien, 1992, pp. 6-9).

Even these principles may seem excessively theoretical, or abstruse to some religious and/or media educators, and so in an effort to make them more concretely evident, the Center for Media Literacy has applied them to

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cultural studies framework. See, in particular, Trend's (1995, p. 33) description of "the new media literacy movement."

[43] See in particular Dines & Humez (1995), and Ryan's (1991, pp. 53-74) discussion of "framing."

[44] Pungente notes that eight key principles were first developed by the Association for Media Literacy "at the request of the Ontario Ministry of Education in 1987" (e-mail of 1/7/98 to the media-l list). These principles are articulated in *Media Literacy Resource Guide* (1989) and were the basis for many later, often edited, lists of media literacy principles. It should also be noted that the Center for Media Literacy originally used a list of four principles, and later added a fifth having to do with audience reception.

U.S. culture and come up with what it terms six "myths of the image culture" (Davis, 1992, pp. 35-36):

1. The world is a dangerous place and we need guns, police and military to protect us.
2. Leave it to the experts (who are usually white men).
3. The 'good life' consists of things that require lots of money.
4. Happiness, satisfaction and sex appeal, just to name a few, are imminent -- and available with the next consumer purchase.
5. Your body is not good enough.
6. Businesses and corporations are concerned for the welfare of everyone.

"Myth" can have several connotations, the most substantive having to do with fundamental ways of explaining for a specific group of people, or culture, what cannot be understood in more "scientific" or "rational" ways. Another connotation is a more derivative one, having to do with the promulgation of specific ideologies. The list put together by the Center for Media Literacy at first glance appears to hold more to the "ideological" sense of "myth." Yet in some ways it is a list that also could be seen as descriptive of a fundamental manner in which U.S. culture is being described for its participants.

The religious educators in this research project found it easy to look at this list and agree that it contains messages the "secular" or "dominant" culture conveys to us in almost every waking hour. What was not easy was taking the list seriously enough to ask how such a structuring of our attention, such a "forming" of our way of being might make religious education both more difficult and at the same time more meaningful to people socialized in this culture.

Another way in which teachers have translated communications scholarship into media literacy education is to suggest a set of deceptively simple questions with which to engage people around consideration of

any text. Mary Byne Hoffman suggests, for example, that we ask "who's in? who's out?" or "who wins, who loses?"[45] of any specific media text[46] we're considering. These questions ask people to attend to the structuring of power that exists in a specific text, and in the process to the ways in which they might respond to such a structuring. It is this kind of media literacy pedagogy that we worked with, which should be distinguished from other processes labelled "media literacy" that do not contain this kind of critical institutional outlook, or which focus, instead, on helping people learn to produce media texts.[47]

The workshop process

In the pages that follow I provide a description of the process we engaged in to illustrate the techniques we used and the kind of learning we experienced together. The workshop met officially (that is, sessions committed to for the research and audiotaped), six times. I hope to give you, the reader, some sense of how we progressed through the workshop, as well as how our insights grew in response to the questions we asked.

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[45] Mary Bryne Hoffman, Catholic media literacy trainer for the Center for Media Literacy, personal communication, October 5, 1995.

[46] By "text" I mean any self contained piece of media such as one film, one television episode, one television commercial, and so on.

[47] This kind of literacy is also deeply embedded in many participatory action research projects. Gaventa (1991, p. 125) notes, for instance, that while "'literacy from the top' is not particularly effective in helping people learn to read, nor in altering their position in society.... when the process of becoming literate is tied to a process of struggle, of gaining knowledge for action, it becomes a far more successful experience, both in the skills people learn and the consciousness they develop about the society as a whole."

As a guide to what follows, this is a list of our sessions, along the genre of media we explored at that session:

February 9, 1996   Orientation
February 25, 1996   Television commercials
March 13, 1996   The Internet
March 20, 1996   Dramatic film
March 27, 1996   Network news
May 1, 1996   MTV/popular songs

It should be noted that this order is not the original order we set up after our first meeting. We had intended to do the network news session immediately following the meeting on television commercials, and then to schedule the film session after that one (thus the order would have been: television commercials, network news, dramatic film, the Internet, MTV/popular songs) but the worst winter season in decades caused the cancellation of meetings, with a subsequent need to reorder sessions due to previous scheduling of rooms.[48]

In general each session focussed on exploring one particular genre of media. This method of moving forward, as well as the specific genres we would consider, was chosen at our first meeting. Prior to our second meeting I put together a schedule based on the dates people were available and the resources we would need for a session (such as the Interactive Resource Development Laboratory for the Internet session). At each session I provided an agenda for the evening (please see Appendix D. for these handouts). After our first session, where I began with a prayer, I opened each meeting by playing a compact disc recording of a popular

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[48] The workshop has continued to meet sporadically since May of 1996, and the issues we're beginning to address now have to do with developing resources for religious education that grow out of media literacy's critique of culture, and in turn reciprocally critique current practice in religious education.

song that in some way tied in with the evening's explorations. Quotes from these songs are found at the beginning of each session description.

Some sessions required people to view "texts" before coming, such as when we discussed the film *Dead Man Walking.* In preparation for the second session I also handed out at our first meeting a complete copy of the Center for Media Literacy's booklet *Forming Values in the Media Age* (O'Brien, 1992) which is a major part of the *Catholic Connections to Media Literacy* (CCML) curriculum kit.[49] This was the only "outside reading" that people in the workshop actually completed, although several noted that they were keeping the bibliographies I provided for future use. Most sessions, however, were complete units in themselves, much as the CCML curriculum proposes, and only required that people come to the meeting ready to engage the texts we would view, and discuss them.[50]

9 February 1996: Orientation, planning, scheduling

The first meeting of our workshop clearly set the stage for the rest of our meetings together. While I had done my best to structure the application process to ensure that people coming in knew that this was a workshop process that would ask them to be clear about their own interests, their own questions, it remained to our first meeting to make that intention manifest. Therefore the first meeting of our workshop was devoted entirely to introductions and orientation. I deliberately did not bring in extra

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[49] I received permission to make these copies by paying a small royalty for each one to the Center for Media Literacy.

[50] The CCML curriculum kit also includes a videotape that can be used to introduce people to the concepts of media literacy. We did not use this tape at any of the workshop sessions, primarily because we got so involved with the texts that we were exploring each evening that we never found the time to watch it.

media, not even music, because I wanted to suggest that our process would grow out of our engagement with each other, albeit the content of our discussion would be mass mediated popular culture.

For my part, I spent a good chunk of time in our first session outlining my concerns, which included a desire to create a space that could allow discussion, even disagreement, to emerge, as well as a clear sense that in some ways I held a lot of power in my hands in relation to the shape and content of the workshop. I wanted to be clear about the possible power structuring early on as a way of alerting all of us to the possible dilemmas, and making them visible rather than invisible or unspoken.[51]

"Orientation" is also about helping people become familiar with an environment, and the difficult task in this kind of process is to create a familiarity that in itself creates the environment. The orientation is actually to a *process* more than to a place or content, and as such is ongoing, ever-emerging. One of the ways we oriented ourselves in this manner was to talk about the CCML kit's principles of media literacy as a starting place, and then move to a broader discussion of what kinds of media we wanted to work with.[52]

Since we had five more meetings after this initial one, it made sense to plan our work around specific "genres" of media. The group decided that we wanted to consider television commercials, television newscasts, the emerging technology of the Internet, film, and popular music/MTV videos. Thus the "consistency" in our process would be the CCML definitions and a desire to consider a genre in itself. The "ongoing-ness"

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[51] Transcript #1, p. 24. All references to "Transcript #" are to my typed transcriptions of workshop audio-tapes.
[52] Transcript #1, pp. 27-29

of the process would grow out of the questions and ideas that emerged in relation to each genre. I suggested that I was interested in facilitating the discussions, and would even be willing to plan and structure the sessions, but that I had no "magic bullets" of information to dispense. We would need to create these ideas together. In practice what occurred was that the group brainstormed the issues they wanted to deal with, and I took the leadership role in providing a schedule and format within which we could explore those issues. I also generally provided relevant resources, and chose the specific media texts we would explore.

The rest of our orienting, to the work and to each other, was spent in talking about how we consumed media at the moment. What kinds of practices did we engage in, what kinds of media did we enjoy? One of the things that was most striking to me about this conversation was the extent to which people clearly thought that it was "critical to be critical." That is, everyone came into the room with a high degree of stated skepticism with relation to the mass media.[53]

> Cathy: I'm very disgusted with television... because it's addictive. And it's mind-numbing. And it's one of those things that sometimes after work, or a long hard day, all you want to do is just put on that tv, and just eewhew, float away. And that's really not what tv should be used for.[54]

Yet for the most part that skepticism was bound up with the pleasure that consuming media evoked. Perhaps the easiest way to describe this is to note that throughout this session when people talked about their enjoyment of a particular piece of media — especially if it was a television

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[53] For typical comments, see Transcript #1, p. 6, p. 7, and p. 11.
[54] Transcript #1, p. 14.

show — they did so almost guiltily, with laughter and self-mocking attitudes, almost as if they thought they ought not to be enjoying it.

Perhaps the other striking observation was that the mass media — particularly television and radio — formed an important backdrop to most people's days. There is a distinct "dailiness" to the practices of media consumption in this culture. Yet for the most part people did not find themselves engaging these media in public or dialogical ways. They spoke of being hungry to talk about media, to engage them.[55]

I also began to wonder about the physicality of our interactions with media. Some of us had the television on during our morning preparations, others "stayed connected" when driving children around by listening to NPR. It was clear that part of the process of this workshop was going to be paying attention to ourselves (both physically and emotionally) and trying to bring to consciousness, in a public space, the practices of media consumption in this context.

An important element of paying attention to ourselves was to take seriously our roles and concerns as religious educators. We began this first session with a prayer that I read aloud, and with silent space for meditation. I asked people to think about how they wanted to begin future sessions, and to bring with them (or send ahead) prayers, meditations, music, and any other things they thought might contribute to our process together. I didn't recognize it at the time, but this first discussion was only sparsely populated by explicitly religious "talk," with most of our energy and enthusiasm focusing on the questions of media use. In many ways this difficulty in bringing explicitly religious practices into the

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[55] For specific quotes from participants, see Transcript #5, pp. 3-24.

conversation would continue throughout our sessions, and ultimately would prove to be one of the most interesting issues we encountered.

We spent the remaining time of this session coming up with a schedule of meeting dates and times that would work for the remaining sessions. We were determined that every member of the workshop should be able to attend each meeting (although, as it worked out, illnesses, deaths and other emergent events meant that at some meetings we missed one or two members). Once we had both a sense of what we wanted to consider, and which dates made sense, I agreed to take the two lists home and merge them into a complete schedule for the rest of our time together.

We closed the workshop with quiet space for meditation, and I gave everyone a copy of the *Catholic Connections to Media Literacy* booklet, "Living in the Image Culture," for further study.

25 February 1996: Television commercials

What if God were one of us,
just a slob like one of us?
    — "One of Us,"Joan Osborne[56]

The first genre-centered meeting of the workshop focussed on close analysis of two typical television commercials: a car ad (*Plymouth Breeze*) and a soft drink ad (*Diet Coke*). The CCML curriculum, as noted earlier, is based on the Holland & Henriot (1983) notion of a "pastoral circle": a praxis-based approach to conscientization. The CCML materials interpreted that process as having four parts: awareness, analysis,

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[56] Taken from the song "One of Us," found on the compact disc *Relish* by Joan Osborne, PolyGram Records, 1995.

reflection, and action. For this first session of our workshop I structured the meeting in these four parts.

I began the meeting with what I called "transitional" space, or time that could be used for personal preparation or meditation as we began an evening. In this case that space was structured by listening to Joan Osborne's recent hit, "What if God were one of us?" After listening to the song — or singing along to it, in some cases — we went around the circle with the simple request that each of us let the others know what our energy level was. This round of "check-ins" became an important part of our process together, alerting us to people's needs, as well as sharing ways in which people had incorporated the past session's work into their religious educational practice. I will bring all of these observations together later in Chapter Three when I discuss our work "outside" of the workshop.

We used a very simple process to help us begin our analysis. First I showed the *Plymouth Breeze* commercial and asked people to take a minute individually to reflect upon what they had seen. I then showed the commercial again and asked them to break into groups of two to spend two minutes talking about it. Then I showed it once again, and asked them to join their groups of two to become four. In this way everybody had three chances to watch the commercial, and two opportunities to discuss it with other people in a small group setting. We then engaged that same process with a *Diet Coke* commercial.

After the quartets finished their discussions of the *Diet Coke* commercial we immediately began a whole group conversation about that commercial, then returned to view the *Plymouth Breeze* commercial once more before having a larger group discussion about it.

The *Diet Coke* commercial we considered was part of a campaign still on-air as of July 1996. This commercial was in many ways emblematic of the kind of commercial that tries to set a "mood" for a product, as opposed to describing its specific merits. The commercial is basically a rich "slide show" of video images, flashed rapidly to the beat of what amounts to a musical anthem for the soft drink *Diet Coke*:

> Just for the thrill of it, just for the chill of it. Just for the taste of it... Just for the thrill of it, *Diet Coke*, the pure appeal of it, the pure appeal of it, this is the taste of it [the music and words are layered over one another, with a single vocalist and a background choir] *Diet Coke*. This is the best of it, forget the rest of it, just for the taste of it, *Diet Coke*.[57]

The initial shot is of a still camera, as is the final shot of the commercial. In between are more than 30 video-shots, which means each picture stays on the screen for less than a full second. In this video slide show the main theme seems to be 'images of America' — stereotypical, or "signifying" images, that is. From the early shots of marching bands, men twirling lassos, and older men at a rural corner diner, to later images of women waiting for a train and circus clowns, the general message is one of unity in diversity. The apparent message seems to be: "here we are America, and aren't we wonderful in all our shapes and sizes?" Of course the more you view this commercial, and thus the longer your period of analysis, the more obvious it becomes how many people are left out of these images of America.

The large group discussion of this commercial is a good example of the way the synergy of the group worked. I'll quote it at length here:[58]

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[57] Transcript 2, pages 9-10.

[58] Please note: in transcribing the audiotapes I used the following representations of trailing off comments or pauses "..." and used "[]" to denote places where I had cut

Jane: When you first showed it, you know, we were like, can we watch it again? I mean, taking notes it's like... Oh, I don't know, I don't remember...

Ronald: I also would like to see it again, I mean, let's not forget it's beautiful!

David: Very well done...

Melanie: And even if you didn't watch it, or focus in on any one thing, or were walking in the other room, you would hear that music ... it's really catchy.

David: It was done well.

Francis: I think that's different from the experience that we had in our group, there was a lot of discomfort with the commercial in our group. A lot.

Ronald: What, what is the discomfort that was felt?

....

Fern: I noticed right away that like the women were snips of women, women who were kind of dismembered, just standing, and then the men seemed to have something to do. Like whatever, the guitar, or like a little bit of community...

Francis: the lasso...

Fern: the lasso, a little community at the bar stool...

....

Sheila: ... the fact that it starts off with a very young, thin model... then after every couple of shots there's a thin woman, and it ends with one. I think it's really selling thinness to young women...

Several: yeah, umhmmm...

Sheila: The other images sort of in-between, ... give you a feeling that this is for all of America.

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out something from the quotation (generally this was something not immediately relevant, such as a comment on an airplane creating noise outside, and so on). There were also times when there was significant laughter accompanying a comment, which I denote as "laughter," or a smaller amount of amusement, which I denote as "giggles."

Francis: Oh interesting! You know I had thought that the whole thing overall was geared toward men, and male bonding... all images that men could grasp onto and say, it's ok, to drink *Diet Coke*, and I'll still be macho, I'll still be a man... and... with that, maybe I can get one of these stick figure women.... (laughter) But I hadn't thought about it, the reverse could also be possible, is that if you can be a stick figure woman, then you can be one of these real community with real men...

David: But there was lots more beside... certainly the thinness of the woman associated with that was a strong theme, I didn't see that when I first saw that, until you pointed it out. And it certainly was there. But, what I did see was that ... it doesn't matter who you are, what color you are, what age you are, what sex you are, where you are, what you're doing, you can have this product. Any time, any place, any way you want, and it doesn't cost much.... it had the purpose of just reminding you that it's *Diet Coke* time. Doesn't matter who you are, where, you could be in a railroad station, with trains going by behind you, you can drink a *Diet Coke*.

Sheila: Also it tastes good, it's diet and it tastes good.

....

Holly: ... what was being sold here? I mean besides *Diet Coke*, obviously.

Jane: Shared history I thought...

David: Well, yeah, it's an American concept, I mean this was very much American...

Ronald: Experience? ... like a common experience.

Sheila: Shared experience.

Fern: Some sorts of community... like little cliques...

....

Holly: Another really central media literacy question is who's in, who's out?

Maggie: Old women.

Francis: Black women. Asian anybody.

Francis: No Latinos.

Ronald: Nobody who could be identified as not being heterosexual.

Maggie: No one with an obvious disability.

Jane: Business people.

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Holly: One of the things that ... I noticed is sort of the interchangeability ... a couple of you have mentioned how everybody fits in, or it could be just about everybody, pictures of all sorts of people... There's a really quick cut, I don't know if anybody noticed this, but there's a young black man sitting in a barber chair surrounded by black barbers viewed through a camera. The next cut is a white man, young white man, in the same chair surrounded by the same black barbers. .... The thing that occurred to me was trying to collapse all differences into interchangeability.

Fern: You know I've never seen an integrated barber shop like ever. I don' t know why, I just haven't. So it seems fakey, it seems staged.

Linda: But also that interchangeability, it's glossing over such a history of racism... because they're not interchangeable, and Coke doesn't make them interchangeable.[59]

As this extended exchange illustrates, just watching a specific commercial repeatedly, and then analyzing its images, immediately create a lively discussion. When Hoffman's core media literacy questions — "who's in? who's out?" "what's being sold?" — were used, the discussion deepened. In this example "who's out?" included anybody carrying obvious religious signifiers, any woman whose body did not conform to model slimness, Asian people, executive business people, urban center images, and so on. An argument could be made that it is impossible to include everyone in such a short sound bite, and of course

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[59] Transcript 2, pages 12-22, inclusive.

that would be accurate. However the overall message here is one of unity in diversity, and the question remains what kind of unity? The basic answer is: consumption of *Diet Coke*, for the one unifying image in most of this montage is either the distinctive deep red and bright white colors of *Diet Coke*, or the image of the can or bottle of the product, subtly held by people or placed in the corners of the images.

As the group noted, one of the most striking juxtapositions of the commercial occurs in the last few images. First there is an image of a young Black man seated and draped in a barber chair, surrounded by a group of smiling Black men dressed in barber clothes. The very next beat of the music is accompanied by the same picture, only in this second shot the young man in the barber chair is white. The subliminal message many of us in the workshop received was that these young men were essentially interchangeable, a message the social reality does not condone; a form of "unity in diversity" through consumption of the same product.

It is important to remember that the creators and producers of these commercials may not have intended for them to be read this way. Most likely they did not, since the stream of images flows past so rapidly one picture is gone almost before it can even be identified. What's interesting here are the ways in which the social context in which one "consumes" a media text has fascinating, and often unintended consequences, for the meaning taken from such a text. It would seem, in this example, that the intended message was one of "unity in diversity," while the message we took from it through analysis was instead one of the continued ways in which various groups of people in U.S. culture undergo what George Gerbner has called "symbolic annihilation," and in which a kind of

"erasing" or "lowest common denominator" imagery masquerades as multicultural acceptance.

This process of repeated viewing, followed by analysis, was also very engaging in the case of the car commercial. That commercial opens with a shot of a car sitting in what appears to be a kindergarten or first grade classroom. The music is bright and cheerful, with echoes of "Twinkle, twinkle, little star" in it. The voice-over proclaims:

> The best way to introduce the new *Plymouth Breeze* is by applying the lessons you learned in kindergarten. Take turns. Share with others. Follow the rules of safety. And oh yeah, get something really cool to bring to show and tell. The new *Plymouth Breeze*.[60]

After the initial close-up image of the car, the camera pans back to a long shot with a family — mother, father, and young (perhaps kindergarten age?) daughter — standing happily next to it. Then you see the car, family inside, driving down the road, parents smiling and occasionally looking at the daughter in the back seat who is clearly safely buckled into a child restraint (just as the voice-over proclaims "follow the rules of safety"). Finally you return to a long shot of the family in the classroom, next to the car and the voice-over adds, "And oh yeah, get something really cool to bring to show and tell. The new *Plymouth Breeze*."

On first "take," this commercial is simply a bright, cheerful ad for a car aimed at a middle-class, or perhaps even working-class, family (the requisite small print which flashes by at one point notes that the MSRP of less than $20,000). This could be "Anyfamily" and their first new car. Of course, that interpretation must become more complex on the second or third pass, because this family is an African-American family, and

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[60] Transcript 2, page 7.

American television being what it is, and America's wounds with race being what they are, such a choice is not a simple, obvious one.

As our group continued to watch and analyze the commercial the bright overtone became more sinister. Who exactly is being asked to "take turns" in a contemporary context where affirmative action is being hotly debated? Similarly, what does it mean to "share with others" in such a context? And what are the "rules of safety" about? Finally, we couldn't help wondering whether or not the "something really cool to bring to show and tell" was the car, or a representation of an intact African-American family.

> Holly: ... in asking the question who is in it, who is out, it's also important to think about the general context of U.S. culture.... showing an African American family in a commercial is not just a coincidence, there's a deliberate choice being made there.... on the one hand, I think overall first impressions are this is a friendly commercial, a nice commercial, look at this nice couple and their child.... I think it's also important to think about the words that are coming as you're focusing on this family. Take turns. Share. Be responsible for safety... and then, at the end, make sure you bring a really cool thing to show and tell.
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> My reaction after having seen this many, many times is, oh yeah, right, an intact black family, isn't that a nice cool thing to bring to show and tell in the context of our usual mass media pictures. ... why is it that African Americans are being told to share and take turns and be responsible for safety? ... race is a real, important, deep division in the U.S., and it's socially constructed in lots of ways....
>
> Sharon: I agree with you, I think it's saying that this family is safe, you can feel comfortable with them... it's showing an image of African Americans that everybody can be comfortable with. It's also talking down to the person that's purchasing the car, which presumably would be an African American, man and woman, who are just starting out... [61]

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[61] Transcript 2, p. 27.

Awareness in this context required thinking about the larger social context into which this commercial was being inserted.[62]

In a culture where what it means to be a self is increasingly defined by how one "represents" oneself to the world, other representations can carry enormous influence. As Neil Postman points out, television commercials in particular are everyday parables about what it means to be a person at this point in our history, or at least what desires a person might have (1988, p. 66 and following). These commercials were both interesting examples of the ways in which mass media "frame" our attention to personhood and "prioritize" it, by representing only a limited range of possibilities and then subtly (or not so subtly in some cases) enforcing specific connotations within those possibilities.

Structurally commercials are the essential work of television. That is, television programming exists to provide an audience for television commercials. In doing this "work," commercials also structure our attention spans. Television commercial producers are finding ever more creative ways to catch our attention for ever shorter intervals. In 1997 sixty second commercials are almost nonexistent, while fifteen second commercials are more and more the norm. Watching television programming we become accustomed to stories, whether news or drama, sitcom or talkshow, that come in ten to fifteen minute segments interspersed by brightly lit, seductively musical commercials. This

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[62] Although she is writing explicitly about films, Miles (1996) makes this point very strongly in *Seeing and Believing.* Jensen (1990, p. 143) also notes that "recent theoretical work ... has argued that media content should be thought of as a relatively open discourse, a resource that acquires its meaning and pragmatic relevance from specific contexts of social action."

structuring of our attention is very different from that which takes place in film, or the kind of divided attention often given to radio broadcasts.

How do these structurings — the ever shorter, more colorfully intense bursts of meaning pushed across our television screens — affect our religious experiences, our spirituality? This question marked the turn from "awareness and analysis" in the workshop to "reflection and action." In beginning to ask this question we started by thinking about our definitions of spirituality:

> Maggie: What gives me life... what gives life to my spirit? Some of that has to do with ... relationships...

> Francis: I think there's a piece about slowing down, or detaching enough from ... my own conversation, my own wrapped-up-ed-ness, to experience the spirit... in relation to others and to creation...

> ....

> Ronald: The other hard thing I think is, particularly about spirituality, is ... sort of making it distinguishable from the cultural stuff. There's that desire to make it separate, because all the definitions I try and come up with ... I'm just repeating all the stuff that's popular to say now, what everybody says about spirituality and yet... to what extent it's just culture... our spiritual sensibility ...

> Fern: Sometimes I get the sense that spirituality is removed or like other than what's going on, and sometimes... it's paradoxical in a way it's detached but it's engaged, for me, and there's something really momentary, kind of cutting edge, pulling me toward whatever is, whether it's culture, or no culture. You know, whatever it is. It's kind of in the midst, and yet it's kind of pulling me beyond the midst in a way...

> ....

> Francis: For me it feels almost more of a source, or a wellspring for action. So... if I'm getting a connection to the spirit, in my spiritual practice... then I feel that action can take place.

Maggie: I think it's a question of integrity... it gets me to do something... and sometimes the doing something is not doing anything, but something is different. But I think that's a real important question.[63]

There were many different kinds of definitions voiced, but the general consensus that people were most open to were definitions that took seriously a "calling to integrity." The CCML kit suggested that an important aspect of the reflection process was bringing appropriate scripture texts to bear on the questions being considered. Given that our definitions emphasized personal integrity, and hearing God within, we next turned to a text from *Jeremiah 31, verse 33*: "Know this is the covenant I shall make with the house of Israel, when those days have come, Yahweh declares, within them I shall plant my law, writing it on their hearts. Then I shall be their God, and they will be my people."[64] The transition from analyzing television commercials to defining spirituality was difficult enough, but turning our attention to scripture was almost impossible. The group basically listened to the text and then sat in silence for a few minutes.

I had anticipated that we would have a lot to say about that text, but when the group did not, we moved to the next experience on the CCML agenda, sharing a song together; in this case "Deep Within."[65] This is a song based on the Jeremiah text that is used commonly in folk or guitar oriented Catholic masses, and I thought the group would most likely be familiar with it. What followed was probably the most self-consciously

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[63] Trancript 2, pp. 36-38, inclusive.
[64] Taken from the *New Jerusalem Bible* translation.
[65] The song "Deep Within" is based on Jeremiah 31:33, Ezekial 36:26, and Joel 2:12. It was written by David Haas, copyright 1987, GIA Publications, Inc.

awkward moment of the entire six week workshop, for a few people were very uncomfortable singing out loud together in this setting.

In talking about this session afterwards, in the exit interviews, one person mused that:

> Francis: I remember some discomfort and I don't remember exactly what it came from. ... partly singing in such a small group I think, because I'm self conscious about the atonal or monotonal qualities of my singing, and it's more noticeable in a small group.... I think I had a sense of discontinuity but wasn't conscious that it was because of the juxtaposition of the two at the time. I mean I can remember the discomfort of the singing, I can remember the incident better than some of the other stuff that we did. .... To me the incongruity is the pop culture and the hymn, the usual context in which I hear hymns. It was that discontinuity, rather than singing or not singing...[66]

Singing together, as opposed to singing along to the radio or a CD, is not a practice that is routinely engaged in outside of liturgy anymore, and that unfamiliarity had to have been part of our discomfort. But there was more to this discontinuity, and we will discuss its implications in Chapters Three and Four of this text.

The final movement of the four part process of the CCML kit is action, and by this time of the evening we had only a very few minutes left before people were ready to go home. I had made some suggestions of possible action people could take on the agenda page I gave out at the beginning of the meeting, and we basically decided to leave it up to people themselves to ponder what the action implications of our work thus far would be. This was a pattern that would follow us throughout the workshop, always arriving at the end of the evening with very little time to discuss possible action. Consequently my whole understanding of how this process might be transformative began to shift from what had initially been a sense that

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[66] Transcript #9, p. 1.

we would come to joint action, to a much more limited, although no less useful, sense that the group process itself was its own kind of space that might create an openness to transformation that would be worked out in each person's life. (But I will return to this question later in this dissertation. For now I want to remain close to the flow of the workshop itself).

What to conclude from this session? At a minimum, that when people pay close critical attention to media texts that are meant to be received without much conscious thought, a universe of alternative meaning can become apparent. Does any of this mean that people ought to reject commercials out of hand? Or that the damagingly racist undertones of many commercials is impossible to resist? No. What I am suggesting is that people in general and religious educators in particular who are concerned about helping people come to a deeper sense of themselves in relation to God and each other, need to pay close attention to both the social environment in which we are embedded, as well as to the subliminal messages of that environment's mass-mediated framework.

Specific conclusions, to summarize, included:

- television commercials can use images as "shorthand" to convey a whole range of meanings (such as the stereotyped images of various "kinds" of Americans used in the *Diet Coke* commercial), many of which may not have been intended by the creator of the commercial;

- television commercials "frame" our attention by asking us to pick up on their meaning(s) in a very limited space of time; one creative and easy strategy educators can employ to move beyond this framing is to watch the same commercial many times over with a diverse group of people; and

- television commercials often invoke certain kinds of pleasures; paying attention to what kinds of pleasures they are trying to provoke can help to delineate whom they are trying to attract into consumption of the product being advertised.

13 March 1996: The World Wide Web on the Internet

> We're living in a time of inconvenience,
> compassion fails me with the meanness in the air...
> We're living in the age of communication,
> where the only voices heard have money in their hands.
> — "Time of Inconvenience," Nanci Griffith[67]

The next session of the workshop was originally scheduled to be an exploration of network news, but the worst winter season in many decades forced a postponement of that session and a reworking of our schedule. Instead, the next time we gathered in what at the time was Boston College's "Interactive Research and Development Lab (IRDL)." The IRDL gave us the logistical possibility of having everyone in the workshop in front of a computer that was connected to the Internet.

The "genre" of media we had chosen to explore that evening was the galaxy of computer mediated information that can be found through navigating the Internet via the World Wide Web. The Internet is a short-hand term for the interconnected network of computers that spans, in many ways, all of the globe. The "world wide web" is actually not a space, so much as a software protocol for hypertext transfer (http) that allows very disparate computer systems to exchange information in a unified,

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[67] Quote from "Time of Inconvenience," a song written and sung by Nanci Griffith, and recorded on the album *Flyer*, Elektra Entertainment, 1994.

easy-to-configure way. Software called a "browser" has been developed that takes advantage of the HTTP protocol to allow people to navigate these interconnected computer systems graphically, by clicking on the information they wish to find, or by entering it into search engines that can then be clicked on.

Nanci Griffith's "Time of Inconvenience" provided a provocative backdrop for the opening of this session. As before, I used the playing of a pop song as a way into the room, a way to note that we were beginning the workshop for the evening, as well as a subtle way to suggest themes for conversation.

The physical arrangements of the IRDL are an important aspect of consideration for this session, since we had deliberately chosen to move out of our usual meeting spot. In doing so we lost access to snacks and drinks, as well as to comfortable chairs and couches arranged in a circle. Instead we were each seated in front of a large desk that had a transparent panel in its top surface. Beneath the panel could be seen a large computer monitor. In addition, each desk had a roll-out drawer containing a computer keyboard, and a mouse and mousepad. The desks were arranged in several straight lines, six to an aisle, with a central vertical aisle dividing each horizontal aisle into one set of two desks and one set of four desks. All the desks faced forward, and were arranged for right hand use, which created some problems for our members who were left-handed. In the front of the room there was a large, multiple panel projection screen, as well as one desk, similarly equipped, turned to face the rest of the room. I sat at the front desk so that I could use the projection

screen to demonstrate how to use *Netscape Navigator,*[68] and workshop members each chose a desk.

We began the evening, as before, with a round of check-ins that gave people a chance to place themselves into the group. It also gave us the opportunity to ask for prayers for one member whose father had died over the weekend, and for another who was at that moment holding a confirmation class that had been postponed due to the weather.

After the check-ins I took some time to describe the World Wide Web (WWW, or "the Web") to the group, since for all but three members of this group, this was their first chance at individual browsing. The metaphor I used to describe the Web to the group was that of a subway system that could connect certain computers quickly and efficiently. Like any subway system, however, there are many places that you can't get to using the subway, and many others that you speed by in passing. Browser software, in this analogy, then becomes a map to the subway system, a way of orienting oneself and keeping track both of where you've been and where you'd like to go.

In many ways the advent of the "age of communications"[69] is incarnated in the WWW, which seems to promise to bring you whatever information you desire at the click of a computer mouse. The dilemmas arising for our group were generally three: first, the difficulty of conversing in "real-time" when you're all glued to separate computer monitors, the difficulty of determining how much authority to grant to any specific piece

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[68] *Netscape Navigator* is a specific piece of software from the general category known as "browsers" that allows a person to move around the World Wide Web.

[69] This is also a phrase from Griffith's song.

of information sought and found through the WWW, and sheer physical exhaustion from crouching in front of a flat computer monitor.[70]

> Francis: We all reflected on how isolating it was to sit there with a machine, and yet I think we kind of held on to the tension of what that technology provides for us in terms of networking and making connections you'd never ever imagine yourself to make. That was practical.... How it felt to be that absorbed, and almost overwhelmed with information and how to deal with that, and how we really didn't.[71]

> Sharon: It also can be very overwhelming, because there's so much information. You can go into just one file and there's all these options.... you're sort of guiding your way through blindly, because you really don't know which information is more useful. And then you feel this need to look at all of it, and a lot of times it just leads you nowhere. I found, too, that some of the things I thought I would be most interested in, or would have really great information when I got there, was just nothing.[72]

One dilemma for religious educators that we noted in the midst of this dawning age of computer-mediated communication is not simply the question of access to obscene or blasphemous or even simply gross material on the Internet, but the question of authority: whose information holds power to inform which decisions and why? In previous times, even as recently as fifty years ago, it was possible to withhold from public scrutiny volatile information about contemporary events. The advent of television began a rush of information that trickled past the dams of "official" controls. The Internet has built to flood strength access to

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[70] Unfortunately, due to technical difficulties that we didn't recognize at the time, our audiotape did not record the middle hour of the workshop. Thus I am relying on memory and interview transcripts (rather than meeting transcripts) to report the physical exhaustion people felt.

[71] Transcript # 11, p. 5.

[72] Transcript #12, p. 9.

information, and in doing so created challenges to traditional arbiters of information.

One of the issues that arose during our "check-in" time had to do with what lyrics might be considered "blasphemous" or not. (This was an issue in relation to one of our members choosing to use the Joan Osborne song in her high school religion class.[73]) Judging something to be blasphemous requires prior agreement on what is sacred, since blasphemy is a judgement against treating that which is sacred in an irreverant manner. Fifty years ago it was unthinkable to utter "damnation" on television, to portray active sexuality, or to suggest that there is no God and little need of one. In 1996 these concerns might not even be raised, or if so, only in relation to what the dominant culture considers "marginal" practices. If access were the only issue, religious communities could simply "tune out" television, or produce their own; and certainly some continue to try to follow this route. But the dilemma is wider and deeper than that: we now have access to conflicting descriptions of what it is to be human, to be in relationship, to encounter transcendance. We have evidence of multiple, diverse definitions of what is sacred. This shift is a rich and fruitful one in many ways for religious communities, but it also requires that religious communities ground their claims of authority in something other than simply "fiat."

Religious communities, however, increasingly have to exist amidst diverse communities, and in doing so have found various ways to assert the validity and reliability of their beliefs and practices. There is a rich and complex history of granting authority to teaching, for example, within the

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[73] See extended quote and description of this participant's experience in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

Catholic church. The tradition has evolved very strict rules for weighing different kinds of authority and for bringing personal experience to bear upon received truths. This process, even the possibility of creating a framework within which one could assess differing truth claims, could be a very important witness for our current cultural landscape, wherein the Internet in particular poses crucial questions of authority and authenticity.

In past decades, however, that framework's foundation was more certain than it is today. In the past it could be argued *whether* this church or that held the full deposit of the faith. But *that* a church could do so went unquestioned. In a "time of inconvenience, " in an age of electronically mediated communication, where information can be generated and expressed outside the traditional boundaries of a community this traditional foundation of belief and even the possibility of having any foundation at all, is being seriously and respectfully questioned. When the authenticity and authority of most information has to be assessed if one is going to function well in a particular society, then it is inevitable that the authenticity and authority of the church would also become part of that questioning. This kind of questioning is both an opportunity and a dilemma. It is an opportunity to probe deeply into the foundations of our knowledge generation, which even (and perhaps especially) in a scientific culture can allow people of faith to come to a sense of the legitimacy of religious belief that is based on more than rote acceptance. But it is also a dilemma if such questioning is not met with reasonable and appropriate support, because it can provoke either wholescale rejection of religious belief, or a fearful refusal to submit such belief to critical rationality. As a group we did not come to any final conclusions about how religious

educators could provide such support, but we did agree that the institution's attempts to stifle questioning of core beliefs were not pedagogically helpful or appropriate.

One of the other more compelling observations of our group was that computer technology in some ways could be said to "eradicate" the body, and yet it fails to do more than deny the body. Computers may in some ways help us to transcend the limits of our physicality by allowing us to communicate over vast distances instantaneously, or by eroding some of the aspects of time-bound processes (think of conversations via list-serv), but they also, quite clearly, tire and exhaust us. Virtual reality may tempt us to withdraw from other more communal realities, keeping our fingers frantically scambling over a keyboard.

Habits such as walking the neighborhood, taking public transportation, listening to birdcalls and feeling the weather on one's face, are exchanged instead for various ways of accessing information via computers. There is information to be gathered through our senses that will never be duplicated by a computer, no matter how they evolve. As a group we felt that it was in this sense of place, this sense of presence, and the solitude of interiority that often enables it to emerge, that spirituality is present.

This erosion of our ability to listen to all of our senses has a powerful impact on the forming of religious identity, particularly in those traditions which have always honored the incarnational aspect of our humanity. Within the Catholic tradition the neighborhood parish is today more honored in the breach than in the reality, but it is a notion we could revive and reinvigorate. In the parish community one is forced into contact with all sorts of people — even in race, class or geographically bound parishes

there are people one would not choose to encounter — whether one chooses, or not. People one meets in church are also likely to be people one sees on the street, or at the bus stop, or at least minimally in cars entering intersections.

While you can choose with whom you correspond using the Internet, generally you can't decide who will or will not be present in your local parish. Learning how to negotiate conflicts, how to hold hands with others, how to sing together and breathe the same incense together, creates a very different kind of community than that found in chat groups. I don't wish to argue that a physical community is always more authentic than a community created and sustained using computer technologies, but I do believe that the *physical*, embodied, smelly, tactile, aural aspects of communities are important in religious formation, and can become lost in the midst of computer assisted communication.

If "honoring our bodies" is to mean more than vague rhetoric, than we must begin to recognize how our communications technologies draw us away from grounded, centered, rootedness in our physicality. These questions of information and authority became particularly compelling as our group struggled to come to some sense of how we understood and utilized "the news." But that is a story we'll pick up later on, when we come to the newscast session.

Specific conclusions from this session:

- the Internet forces upon us a recognition of the constructed nature of information;
- using the Web also makes very clear our bodiliness, even as it is advertised as a technology that can overcome our embodiedness; and

- religious communities perhaps have more to be concerned about in dealing with issues of "authority" of information, than with "blasphemy" or "obscenity."

20 March 1996: Film

> When neither light nor darkness,
> when neither night or day,
> when neither kind nor heartless,
> when neither lost or saved,
> when neither still nor moving,
> when neither held or free.
> Oh, to be so human....
>   — "Dead Man Walking," Mary Chapin Carpenter[74]

We had among our group a member who has been involved with film viewing and film criticism for many years. As a way into a consideration of the use of dramatic film in religious education, we decided to watch the film *Dead Man Walking* then playing in theaters around Boston, and come to a session prepared to discuss it. David, our film critic, volunteered to prepare for and facilitate that session. We began with our usual moments of musical reflection. In this case I had brought Mary Chapin Carpenter's *Dead Man Walking* from the album that was released in conjunction with the film. We then did our usual round of "checking-in." After that David showed an excerpt of a documentary film on capital punishment, *The Thin Blue Line*, by way of comparison. We watched the ten minute excerpt, and

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[74] Quote from "Dead Man Walking," (my transcription) written and sung by Mary Chapin Carpenter, on the album *Dead Man Walking*, "music from and inspired by the motion picture," Sony Music Entertainment Inc., 1995.

then used a handout he gave us with focusing questions to have a large group discussion which he facilitated.[75]

This film was by far the most intense of the media texts we experienced together. Some of that intensity came from the differences in production that can be accomplished in a film as opposed to television. That is, you go to see a film on someone else's schedule — the theater's — in someone else's building, with many other people you generally don't know. You then agree to sit in darkness, riveting your attention upon a very large screen in front of you, with a depth and timbre of sound unachievable (at least to this day) in any home setting, and with detail and depth not available in the smaller visual ratio of television. Further more, you do so for extended periods of time uninterrupted by commercials or other distractions. All of these ways in which you yield up control to other factors increases the intensity of the experience, *if* (and that's a large if) the story succeeds in drawing you into its realm. Most dramatic films are at least one hour and 45 minutes in length, another difference from television. Finally, given the greater amount of revenue to be generated by a single film, as opposed to the advertising dollars available around a single episode of a television show, the production values of film allow for more sweeping cinematography, more careful lighting, and so on.

This film was based on the life and experiences of Sr. Helen Prejean and her experience companioning people on death row. While the movie portrays one character that was composed from the many people she has worked with, it retains an eerie quality of authenticity.[76] The bulk of the

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[75] See Apendix B. for this handout.

[76] Sister Helen Prejean's experiences are detailed in her book, *Dead Man Walking,* New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

story is the unfolding relationship between Sr. Helen Prejean and Matthew Poncelet, a man on death row for having killed a young couple. Sr. Prejean is asked to correspond with this prisoner, and eventually becomes his spiritual advisor as he moves through his last weeks until execution.

As many of our workshop participants pointed out, there is very little that is likeable about Matthew Poncelet.[77] Yet that very repellence is part of the movie's story, for the main character, Sr. Prejean, gradually comes to know this young man as he comes to know himself, and in the revealing of himself he comes to recognize that she sees him for who he is, in all of his raw vulnerability and ugly violence — a child of God. That phrase in itself might sound cliched to some, but in the context of this drama it is embedded in a relationship, in at least the telling of the story of a relationship, that transforms the cliche into a phrase with the ring of truth.

> Fern: I think this powerful transforming love just ... poured out of Sr. Helen, I know that sounds kind of romantic, but it really shaped my notion of the sacramentality of her ministry....
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> Sam: I think she was able to convey God's unconditional love. Which is a very difficult thing to do, and I, and it seemed to me like it was the first time in his life that he'd ever experienced it. Or love from any other kind of person, period.
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> Holly: His line that, about how it's the first time anybody's ever called me a son of God.[78]

Margaret Miles writes that popular films can be particularly evocative informants on contemporary social situations, if they are considered as indicative in some ways of the social location in which they are

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[77] Transcript 4. p. 20, lines 12-25.
[78] Transcript 4, pp. 11-12, lines 16-7.

embedded.[79] In this case the film *Dead Man Walking* was released during the long prelude to the presidential campaign in the United States. Issues of crime and violence were an important focus in the 1996 election year, and there was a significant amount of discussion in television forums of the need to "crack down on crime" and to reinstitute the death penalty. Television talk shows were full of people who sought to evade responsibility for their crimes by blaming their upbringing, and of audiences who refused that explanation and decried the "culture of therapy" and the "poor, poor, pitiful me" syndrome. This larger social context to the film added a particularly compelling element to its strong portrayal of the ugly details of death row and lethal injection, and its unwillingness to settle for easy or simplistic answers.

Our discussion centered around three central issues. First, George put it well when he quoted Ursula LeGuin as saying that "there are some injuries that can not be healed, they have to be transcended."[80] Were the families in this story hurt more by the traumatic violence that interrupted their lives? or by hanging on to the need for vengeance in the aftermath of that violence? What meaning is there in the aftermath of such an act of violence? A second discussion focused on what reconciliation consists in. The film provided a stark contrast in some ways, between the prison chaplain's notion that Sr. Prejean was there only to "save Matthew's soul," an undertaking that seemed to be primarily focussed on statements of belief and confession, and Sr. Prejean's desire to come to know

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[79] Miles writes (1996, pp. 23-25), for example, that we should consider films as "products of the culture's social, sexual, religious, political, and institutional configurations.... The representation and examination of values and moral commitments does not presently occur most pointedly in churches, synagogues, or mosques, but before the eyes of 'congregations' in movie theaters."

[80] Transcript 4, p. 8, line 19.

Matthew, and in the knowing, in the intimacy of relationship, support his move into honesty and thus his claiming of his soul. Such a reconciliation in no way diminishes the horror of the crime, but it does create a space in which some meaning can be found, some redemption occur. The third discussion centered on the ways in which Matthew had been caught up in the less overt but no less painful violence of a culture that permits such poverty to exist, and that dispatches people with such chilling effiency and lack of personal responsibility. One of the final images of the film is of Matthew strapped to the lethal injection gurney in a posture of crucifixion, overlaid by the images of the victims. How is Christ present in Matthew?

This last question was one of the most difficult ones for all of us. From early in the discussion, when Linda noted that Sr. Prejean's singing of "Be Not Afraid"[81] had "put a new twist on that song for me, 'cause I'd never thought about God walking with a person like Matthew Poncelet..."[82] it was clear that the film had in some way encouraged all of us to rethink what we meant by forgiveness, by redemption, by personhood. In some ways it was easy for us as middle class, highly educated religious educators to talk about Jesus' pattern of commitment to those on the margins of his society. But it was much more difficult for us to envision, feel, embody such a commitment in a contemporary context. Many of us came away from this film questioning whether or not we were deeply enough committed to creating and embodying the kingdom of God.[83]

Films such as *Dead Man Walking* are rare in U.S. culture, although not impossible to find.[84] Their benefit to religious educators is incalculable for

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[81] Transcript 4., pp. 5-6, lines 19-24, and p. 6, lines 1-9.
[82] Transcript 4, p. 5, lines 20-21.
[83] Transcript 4, pp. 7, 10, 11, and 47.
[84] Miles (1996) does detailed readings of several such films in her book.

precisely this kind of impact. In our case this film brought us directly and wholeheartedly into a complex discussion of what redemption meant, how we experienced forgiveness, what the sacramentality of ministry looked like in this context and so on. The discussion was not an abstract one, embedded in formal theological language, but rather very concrete and present, capturing our emotional reactions as much as our intellects in the theological language we used.

Sometimes films have explicit religious themes. *Dead Man Walking* is an obvious case, as is *Jesus of Montreal.* But as is apparent from our group's use of films in their own classrooms, films that touch on profound human dilemmas can be just as effective in a religious ed classroom as films that have explicit religious symbolism. David used *E.T.* in his confirmation classes to evoke a feeling for the solidarity of the disciples, for example. He also used scenes from the film *Rainman* in his class discussions of the biblical text of the prodigal son. There are no clear "rules" for choosing films to use in a particular context or setting. The goal ought always to be to choose a film that evokes an emotional aura that is to be explored, or a particular dilemma under consideration. The subject of the learning event is chosen, first, and then a film is chosen that might help to explore it.[85]

Dramatic film's ability to create intense emotionality, however, also creates a problem in our contemporary setting, where action and disaster films keep "upping the ante" of adrenalin, at the same time as they lower any expectations of social responsibility. It is in relation to films such as *Scream, Murder on Elm Street*, and so on that religious educators have a

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[85] While they were not yet available at the time of our workshop, Pamela Legg's (1996) and (1997) descriptions of film as "an opportunity for religious exploration" are particularly useful for religious educators.

different kind of task in hand: to help our communities of faith explore emotionality — fear, anger, alienation, and so on — in more profound and historically grounded ways than are possible in commercially oriented films.

We know how important stories are to our sense of place in the world, to the ways in which we understand who we are and what we are about. When story-telling becomes a commodified, commercial endeavor, then our sense of who we are and what we are about risks that same commodification. Postman suggests that "television is our culture's principal mode of knowing about itself" (1985, p. 92), and that mode reveals little that is authentic about religion. Religious communities, communities of faith, are a powerful source in this culture of alternative stories, different histories, languages, myth-systems, poetry, and so on. Rather than embedding these stories in the grammar and visual imagery of film, which requires real artistry and skill, not to mention access to large amounts of capital, perhaps it makes more sense to dig deeply into our traditions to find ways in which we can tell and re-tell the most powerful of these stories, at one and the same time providing alternatives to the content provided by consumer culture as well alternatives to the process of that culture.

Just as Sr. Prejean used the experience of walking with a prisoner on death row to try to make a different sense of the random violence that traumatized the families portrayed in the film than they had had before, persons and communities of faith can walk with people in this culture and provide a different interpretation of events as currently packaged, as well as a different sense of what is important to be focused upon. Even watching the film *Dead Man Walking* is only one step towards a religious

experience within a community. To the extent that the film is shared, that people join together to think through, to feel through, to act through the issues it raises, to that extent does the film become a learning event. But if it is simply another product to be consumed, a chance to feel in touch with something larger than oneself for 90 minutes in a theater, then it can draws us back into the commodification we all face.

Specific conclusions we came to included:

- carefully considering the production details of a film — elements such as lighting, close-ups versus long shots, musical scores, and so on — can deepen appreciation for, and understanding of, a film;

- films can also be explored as, in Miles' terms, "particularly evocative social informants"; in this example problematizing issues surrounding capital punishment in the United States;

- films are constructed in such a way that they create an intensity of emotion which can, if well considered, be used to further particular elements of religious education; and

- overtly religious elements in this film allowed the group to raise and discuss explicitly theological issues such as redemption, transcendence, forgiveness.

> Don't be tempted by the shiny apple,
> don't you eat of a bitter fruit,
> hunger only for a taste of justice,
> hunger only for a world of truth,
> 'cause all that you have is your soul.
> — "All that you have is your soul," Tracy Chapman[86]

A different set of issues arises in relation to the ways in which we consume and construct "the news." As the Center for Media Literacy's first principle of media literacy suggests, "media construct reality." That idea is particularly well displayed when considering mass mediated news. Our awareness and analysis of a network news broadcast was divided into two sections. We began with rather long introductions that described our own individual news consumption, and then we spent the second half of the session analyzing the CBS and ABC lead news story for the evening of March 3, 1996.

In this context it quickly became clear that we need to learn how to discern not simply what is being presented to us as news, but how it is being constructed, whether it is pertinent to us, what other kinds of information we might find newsworthy, and so on. Within our research workshop a preponderance of people got most of their news through National Public Radio and programs such as *All Things Considered.* People who regularly turned on local news often talked about "enjoying the company" of the local news team, particularly in the mornings:

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[86] Quote from "All that you have is your soul," written and sung by Tracy Chapman, from the compact disc *Crossroads,* Elektra Entertainment, 1989.

Fern: ...the tv's always on while I'm there, cooking, I'll put on a two hour news show at night. And I almost find the news entertaining now, and sometimes I'll have it on in the morning, too... I just like the way the people communicate, they have this rapport, and I just like to have them there in the morning joking around. I don't even care what they're saying. They're more entertaining than my housemates at that hour.[87]

In general radio and television news became a comfortable sort of background, whether to commuting or child chauffeuring, or to cooking and cleaning at home. One member of the group spoke of her frustration with both the increased amount of news, and yet its increasing lack of utility:

Cathy: I don't like to watch the news on tv. I find it very, very depressing, not very enlightening. I've also noticed now the trend towards so much news on tv. You know, first it was just a half hour, now it's an hour, and then an hour and a half. It's just this constant stream of news. Now with cable, too, all the different channels that you can get, there's all these news channels. The news just seems to be such a popular thing, and becoming very sensationalistic, too....[88]

The primary reason I chose to use CBS and ABC network broadcasts was that in Boston they broadcast their evening news programs a half an hour apart, so it was possible for me to tape both newscasts from the same evening. Interestingly, that choice turned out to be fortuitous, as the lead story for both broadcasts was the same — a recent bombing in Israel — and gave us an ideal way to compare and contrast the two broadcasts.

This "compare and contrast" is a simple but effective means of helping people analyze the evening news, for at any given time the lead story is generally the same on the network news, while the coverage of it differs,

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[87] Transcript #5, p. 6.
[88] Transcript #5, p. 5.

and the differences provide compelling examples of the ways in which network newscasts construct our understanding of the story in question.

On this evening the contrast was particularly compelling, since CBS spent six minutes and 38 seconds on the story, while ABC had more than nine minutes of coverage.[89] Both newscasts used a soundbite and picture from the same presidential news remarks given upon Clinton's return from Camp David on the subject (this was clear from the clothes the President wore, the background scenery, and so on), but the particular slant they gave was very different.

CBS chose to use the following Clinton soundbite: "This is a troubling moment, and I am determined to see that it does not defeat the peace process, and I am determined to do everything I can on behalf of the United States to support those who are standing against terrorism and standing for peace."[90] ABC, on the other hand, quoted Clinton this way: "I do believe that Chairman Arafat has made efforts and I think that he will make more. Uh, we have to build the capacity of all the forces in the Middle East, including the Palestinian authorities, to promote law and order and to stand against terrorism."[91]

In CBS's case the sound bite they chose to use emphasized Clinton's insistence that the United States would not stand for this kind of terrorist attack, and would take immediate steps to counter it, while the ABC sound bite emphasized Clinton's insistence that this was an issue that had to be dealt with in the region by all those who made up the region,

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[89] By my VCR counter, CBS used six minutes and 38 seconds on the story, while ABC used nine minutes and seven seconds.

[90] Transcribed from a videotape recording of the CBS evening news broadcast of March 3, 1996.

[91] Transcribed from a videotape recording of the ABC evening news broadcast of March 3, 1996

and that U.S. would do its best to support such a multilateral solution. These are quite different conclusions. And of course, no president can fully articulate his intentions in a 15 second sound bite. But in the world of the six minute news story, a 15 second sound bite is often all that is used; and it is usually accompanied by some kind of image.

> Maggie: I found the language in the first one I watched [the CBS broadcast] really incendiary... I can't remember the words now, but the voice over as they were showing the pictures, was just so, I don't mean to say pro-Israeli in terms of they should have been anti-Israeli, but I found their effect of the language was just to raise the ante among the listeners.[92]

In the case of CBS, the images were primarily images of devastation from the bombed bus site: craters, masses of unidentified wreckage, religious workers in rubber gloves searching for body parts, and so on. There was also a brief interview with U.S. Ambassador Rose, in which he noted that: "Fundamentally these groups have declared war on the peace process and we will declare war on them."[93] The overwhelming impression was of the grim reality of war. ABC, on the other hand, while using some of the same images of the bombed out bus, also included images of funerals, and two separate reports: one a background story describing how *Hamas* is not simply a terrorist organization, but rather a broad movement with many splinter groups, and one a report on how young Palestinians and Israelis are trying to promote peace. The images accompanying these reports represented both Israelis and Palestinians in a context other than that of war and terrorism.

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[92] Transcript #5, page 27.
[93] Transcribed from a videotape recording of the CBS evening news broadcast of March 3, 1996.

> Sheila: I noticed that in the ABC report, it was longer. They had four reports, another one that was coming with the three at the beginning and then another one coming later, so you get more, and they're able to go in more depth.... I also had a problem with the CBS reporter, the adjectives that were used were so... biased.
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> ... they would tell you what Clinton is going to say before he says it. And then he says it in different words, and they use more adjectives to describe it. Instead of just showing the soundbite and you hearing what the person's going to say. They set the agenda of how you're going to listen to it.... you really don't even hear the sound bite as much as you already know where you're looking. On the ABC report they didn't do it, they didn't use quite as many adjectives. [94]

That CBS and ABC were constructing their own versions of the events and defining our agenda for watching was very clear to our group. Other elements of construction that our group identified included the kinds and variety of experts interviewed to frame the story in question. On CBS those experts were uniformly male, and for the most part white, while on ABC they were male and female, white and Middle Eastern. Noting this contrast is not to imply that gender or race necessarily invalidates or authenticates whatever information these experts were presenting; rather, it is to point out the more subtle shaping of reality that occurs in such contexts. As Hoffman suggests, "who's in, who's out? and who wins, who loses?" are powerful questions with which to examine any media text, but particularly news texts.[95]

Exploring such questions in relation to these news broadcasts also led us to a discussion of what we needed to get from the news. Of what use was the information that was presented? What, if anything could we do, positively and constructively, about it? What kinds of questions didn't it answer? The CBS newscast was entirely done by "experts" and took the

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[94] Transcript #5, page 29.
[95] Mary Byrne Hoffman, Personal communication, October 5, 1995.

line that the U.S. government would have to have the primary impact in the region. The ABC newscast, on the other hand, spent a significant portion of time profiling the experiences of a group of young Palestinian and Jewish students who were traveling around the U.S. together to promote peace and understanding in the Middle East. ABC was "representing" a way of having influence, of having an impact on the situation, that "ordinary" people could become involved in. The ABC segments also portrayed Jews and Palestinians, not to mention Christians, engaged in peaceful conversations with each other, while the CBS newscast used only images of violently engaged Palestinian terrorists and Jewish soldiers to accompany its storyline.

Here again, as with the commercial discussion, we were struck by the extent to which six to ten minute segments, sandwiched between two to three minutes of commercials, barely allow a viewer to absorb the bare outlines of a particular set of events, let alone move to a more engaged analysis of the information presented. Yet it is precisely that kind of engaged analysis that is necessary for people to take any kind of appropriate and constructive action. As Postman notes (1985, p. 137):

> ... with media whose structure is biased toward furnishing images and fragments, we are deprived of access to an historical perspective. In the absence of continuity and context... 'bits of information cannot be integrated into an intelligent and consistent whole.' ... The politics of image and instantaneous news provides no such context, is, in fact, hampered by attempts to provide any.

Our group also had a fairly long discussion about the ways in which these two newscasts framed the "religious-ness" of the issue.

> Maggie: The other thing was that the portrayal of Islam, or of Islamic folk, Muslims, on the CBS newscast was always in terms of the extremists... and you had them, too, on ABC, but you also had the kids, and you had as part of the report on the kids this event that was held at the Islamic Center where you had

Muslims and Jews together participating in this dialogue, so you had a different portrayal. I think one of the things that we are not yet even conscious of is how we portray Islam on television.[96]

So what purpose does "the news" serve? What kind of "hunger" does it meet? What kind of "pleasure" does it evoke? Postman has entitled one of his recent books about our mass mediated culture *Amusing Ourselves to Death.* Perhaps that title is a very appropriate index of our conversation: news was far more often entertainment than it was information that was useful, and that very entertainment can be driving us into constructions of reality that are very dangerous if we accept them without critique.

What news, if any, did our group find helpful? Generally the weather/traffic reports, and the local neighborhood information provided either in neighborhood newspapers or through neighborhood insets in daily city papers. As one person put it:

> Melanie: ... the local newspaper. That's one I never miss, because it's got information about schools and town meeting, and the police blotter... really practical stuff that living in a community you need to know.[97]

What of the Catholic press? In our group very few people even read the local diocesan paper. One member said, "I look at *The Pilot*. I won't say I read it, but I look at it."[98] This was a comment which provoked a lot of laughter, as well as another member recounting that a priest had told him "it was good for wrapping fish."[99] National Catholic news publications, like *America* and *Commonweal,* on the other hand, were mentioned by the

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[96] Transcript #5, p. 33.
[97] Transcript #5, p. 10.
[98] Transcript #5, p. 10.
[99] Transcript #5, p.20.

group,[100] as was the *National Catholic Reporter*, particularly for its coverage of international stories.[101]

There is an obvious dilemma here: if people get most of their news from radio or television, and do not read the local Catholic press, then how are they to get accurate information about their most immediate religious communities? One answer would be to trust that the "secular" news media are unbiased and objective in their reporting (not a media literate response), another would be to suggest that communities of faith have to become more self conscious about how and when and where they get their news.

Specific conclusions reached, in summary:

- a network newscast is a construction of current events that creates a particular slant on a given news "story";
- news, whether radio, television or in some other medium, is often used by workshop participants to create a familiar background to their day;
- the ways in which newscasts are constructed "frame" our reality, in many cases creating an agenda that is limited by what is portrayed; and
- conveying religious information is particularly problematic, as workshop participants noted how biased network news reporting of religion is, but also did not read local religious reporting.

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[100] Transcript #5, p. 10.
[101] Transcript #5, p. 10, p. 17, p. 24.

May 1st: Music video

> Life is a mystery, everyone must stand alone,
> I hear you call my name
> and it feels like home
>   — "Like a Prayer," Madonna[102]

The final session of our workshop took place after a significant break in time, and in weather — that evening it was the first day of May, and the temperatures had reached the 60's for the first time in a long while. Even with the distractions of near summer breezes, however, we gathered with energy to explore a music video. Although we had been using popular music as opening meditation for most of our sessions, this was the first time we sat down to deliberately explore the resources and contradictions present in pop music. Several people in the group, including myself, have long been fans of the pop singer Madonna, whose music frequently incorporates religious themes and imagery, so we decided to consider one of the most religiously explicit of her songs, "Like a Prayer."

What we chose to do is easy enough to replicate in other settings, as several of our group later chose to do. After our initial round of check-ins, we began by reading a printed version of the lyrics to the song.[103] After some time to think about them, we then listened to the song itself. Again, after time to think about it, we then watched the music video. This movement, from print to music to music video allowed us all to appreciate the multi-faceted nature of the song without succumbing immediately to the visual impact of the video.

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[102] Quote from "Like a Prayer," written and sung by Madonna, from the compact disc *Like a Prayer*, Webo Girl Publishing, Inc., 1988.
[103] Lyrics were transcribed from album liner notes.

Released in 1988 "Like a Prayer" can be "read" (that is, seen/heard/interpreted) on multiple levels. The lyrics of the song — "Life is a mystery, everyone must stand alone, I hear you call my name, and it feels like home" — are ambiguous enough to be heard as either a love song to an intimate lover, or a prayer to a God known intimately in relationship. The initial video that was produced used the song as background to a narrative that traced a young white woman's witness of a violent crime perpetrated by white men upon a white woman, the witness's retreat to a black church, a dream in which the witness (portrayed by Madonna) experienced a religious conversion, and her subsequent action on behalf of the black man wrongly accused of the crime. The video is full of religious imagery — a church, a church choir, a statue of a saint — as well as provocative images of burning crosses and Madonna dancing in a revealing dress.

How did the group interpret these provocative images? The discussion was so interesting that I will quote sections of it at length:

> Francis: What struck me was that I read this, and given my preconceived notions of Madonna, I expected the sex. I expected, this was just one big metaphor for yet another sexual relationship. And so I was surprised by the video.

> Holly: .... what did you think, when you saw the video?

> Francis: Assuming for the sake of argument that it was a religious statement, I thought it was critical of the church, of the way Christianity has been used. ... I thought that in a lot of ways... I mean, in church you're allowed to sit, stand and kneel, period. You're not allowed to lie on a bench. So, you know there was an extent to which it was an opening, a call to open up. The right thing to do is open those gates, to bail the prisoner out, to bail out the Good Samaritan, the Christ figure who went to help the neighbor.... The other thing that came back to me was when she was floating in the clouds, I thought that the intent was that it was a God figure, pulling her down, and that it was a woman, it turned out to be a female God figure, which was a woman of color.

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David: This time the whole idea of her opening the door in front of the saint, and later on bailing the guy out, and so forth, could be interpreted as a call to people of the world, don't put God in a cage some place away where he not only can't be touched, but shouldn't be touched and you almost can't see him and don't want to see him and so forth.

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Sharon: I saw it as a second possibility as well. I saw it as both of these possibilities. What you just said, and then also a call to the white community to let the black community free.

Holly: Yeah, that's very much how, um, I've always seen it myself. ... as a very strong anti-racist statement, but that's not universally perceived, by any means.

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Sharon: I think that there's several themes running through there, not just the racial thing, but also the thing about other people being a Christ figure wrongly accused for somebody else's acts. I don't think there's just one thing intended through the film, I think they did several. There's themes upon themes and subtexts, and they all are meant to somehow push us in certain directions.[104]

The group was particularly struck by the images that evoked a female element to God, and by the strong anti-racist message. As with any group I've shown this music video to, we eventually began to talk about intentionality on the part of the artist. In Madonna's case that always includes talking about her provocative use of imagery, particularly sexual imagery.[105]

Sharon: I also think anybody who sort of shocks us into discussing these things there's, something right is happening, even if you don't agree with what they're doing. They bring this to the top of our conversation, it needs to be there.That's part of what I think artists are always trying to do, whether they do it in subtle

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[104] Transcript #6, pp. 8-11.
[105] Transcript 6, p. 21-22, lines 2-1 on next page. See also Transcript #12, p. 11.

ways or whether they do it in sort of, "I feel comfortable with this" ways, or whether they shock you, they always, they want to bring you to discussion.....

And also I think in some ways it always takes a lot of courage to sort of step out, outside of the norm, whether you agree with how that person steps outside of the norm or not, or agree with what that message is. I just always try to recognize that courage... because a lot of times all of us or most of us are just too complacent, even if we're not complacent on some issues, we are on others, and I think people need to be shocked into, or just brought into a conscious reality of the ways we are complacent....[106]

Given this kind of "provocation" and the institutional concerns about it, what use could this text have within religious education? Several members thought it would a very useful resource, particularly for talking about conversion and prayer, but everyone felt that using it required substantial preparation, particularly if it were going to be used in the midst of a parish community that was new to the experience of opening up pop culture texts for religious interpretation. One member pointed out that it might be harder for him to use it, than for his students to view it:

David: And the other thing, too, I said in the small group was that, that for me unlike perhaps some of the groups that you might actually have in religious education, they're used to seeing these videos. I'm not. I mean they're as available to me, I just don't watch them.[107]

Popular music is a rich resource in many ways. Many of the younger members of our group consistently noted to its ability to help them find a space beyond the mundane. Music's ability to move people, to connect to bodily rhythms as much as intellectual ones, helped people feel that it led us to springs that are deeper than sheer commodification. As one workshop member put it:

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[106] Transcript #12, p. 11.
[107] Transcript #6, p. 15.

Fern: ... a lot of my faith and experience of faith comes through that medium of music and sharing faith through song and stuff, whether it's liturgical songs or folk rock .... and that's the kind of prophetic thing that I really like about music, that really worked for me.[108]

Just as with film, however, there are problems with using pop songs in religious education, even if the intent is to evoke emotionality. Obviously the imagery and emotional tone available is circumscribed by commercial considerations, and embedded in a specific cultural "moment" that may or may not have the resonance an educator intends at any given time and for a particular group. As with the use of any kind of popular cultural text, pop music needs to be shared in a context that creates an openness to critical interpretation and shared dialogue. Perhaps, as with film, what is most useful is the way in which pop songs can draw us into a particular kind of space, elicit specific questions, and/or provoke certain kinds of feelings which religious educators can then use to work with groups to dig out from our own traditions relevant imagery and music. The dynamic process is one of bringing religious language, image, meaning into what has previously been construed as a commercial, secular, and otherwise non-religious realm; as opposed to bringing pop music into a religious realm.

Specific conclusions, in summary:
- popular songs function on multiple levels of meaning, particularly when they are embedded in music videos;
- many of the conclusions we came to in relation to dramatic film are applicable in relation to music videos, particularly those with clear narrative lines (emotional intensity, evocative social informants, etc.);

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[108] Transcript #11, p. 5.

- as before, explicitly religious images drew out explicitly religious language from workshop participants; and
- as with all the other mass-mediated texts we explored, considering music videos in a context where there was an opportunity for critical dialogue enhanced people's enjoyment of them.

Moving beyond initial insights

Although some members of our workshop began the research with significant background in media production, most found this exposure to media literacy to be a new experience. From that perspective simply learning how to engage popular culture critically was both useful and interesting. Although from the beginning I was concerned that workshop members who understood media production might be bored by the more elementary aspects of media literacy work, we discovered that the media texts we engaged were interesting enough in themselves — and opportunities to talk about them with this kind of group rare enough — that even these more experienced workshop members enjoyed the process.

The energy of this kind of critical dialogue, an energy that arose both from acknowledging the pleasure these texts evoked for us as well as problematizing certain aspects of their representation, flowed throughout our meetings. Many people noted during our "check-ins" that although they were tired from a long day of teaching, they looked forward to this chance to meet and talk with other religious educators about these issues.

What can we conclude beyond this basic affirmation that media literacy work can be an exciting mode of adult education for religious educators? To answer that question we need to consider the issues that

arose during the post-workshop interviews, a task I will turn to in the next chapter. Before doing that, however, I need to state very clearly, if it was not already obvious from the session descriptions, that we did not follow the CCML curriculum closely after our second meeting. Instead we used its core principles and general media literacy ideas to explore the texts and concerns this group of people brought to the discussion. For that reason, although the CCML curriculum was a crucial starting point for us, this research project did not systematically evaluate its effectiveness beyond its use as a catalyst (a task it performed well), and its function as a general resource.

The implications of media literacy for religious education, ideas we often touched on briefly in various sessions, became much more apparent during the post-workshop interviews. The workshop process itself basically demonstrated that overtly religious texts evoked more explicit theological reflection than did texts that did not contain obvious religious symbolism. On the other hand, as will become evident in what follows, even workshop sessions that engaged texts with no obvious religious symbolism left participants feeling that they had enhanced their religious experience in some way. It is to that discussion that I turn now.