

## Monsters or Icons?



This year Theophany fell on a weekday and one of our members brought his 20-month-old daughter, Hannah, to the evening liturgy. Hannah had been baptized in the church and her parents bring her every Sunday, so she is comfortable with the people and surroundings. Nevertheless, toward the end of the liturgy, she began to fuss and cry, quite a normal reaction since it was near her bedtime. After liturgy I commented, “Although she is up past her bedtime, she will fall asleep tonight with the beautiful images of these icons in her little brain and she will sleep peacefully.”

Hannah is a calm child and seldom fusses unless she has reason. Of course, some children may suffer from physical ailments and the only way they can express their discomfort is through crying. Environmental factors also play a role. When parents have a troubled relationship, children can suffer from psychological and behavioral problems, as teachers of primary school children know. Yet what about the role of other aspects of our environment, aspects of daily life that adults overlook but which may have more subtle detrimental effects on small children?

Walk out of your house in the morning and onto the street and you are bombarded with sights and sounds—traffic rushes by, a motorcycle nearly hitting you from behind; hawkers advertise their wares, some with crackling microphones. Every shop seems to have a radio blaring out meaningless pop music. Signs and billboards everywhere urge us to buy what we do not need, to consume products that harm our health, and to watch films that further dull our overstressed psyches. It is no wonder so many people are rushing about looking so unhappy, why suicides are on the increase, why so many people, including those as young as primary school, are being treated for depression. They simply cannot cope with an increasingly chaotic world.

Perhaps diagnosis is better today and doctors as well as teachers can recognize problematic behavior in children that was previously attributed to some phase of growing up. Nevertheless, I suspect that those children of previous generations, those who lived in the countryside, who got sufficient physical exercise running around outside, who played simple games with just a ball and a few homemade toys—they were more creative and less materialistic. They interacted with other kids and animals and developed empathy; they explored the wonders of nature and were more content with life. Life moved more slowly and was more predictable.

Today’s urban children have no countryside to explore. Parents keep younger children indoors in fear of the monsters outdoors—speeding traffic, drug dealers, even kidnappers. Children’s physical development suffers because they do not get enough exercise, and they become near-sighted due to the limited views within the apartment. And what about their emotional development? Increasingly busy parents give their children over to the television and the computer.

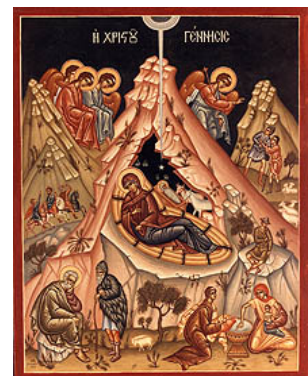
Despite the nearly 100 channels that cable TV offers, very few programs are appropriate for children. While the computer can be an effective educational resource, like TV, there is a lot of detrimental material—pornography, violence, and pointless nonsense. Many youngsters become addicted to computer games, and these tend to be full of high-speed action, monsters, and mayhem.

Too much activity causes fatigue, not only in our muscles but also in our brains. We need time to sit and think, to reflect on what is happening to us and around us, to make sense of our lives. If we just engage in our activities each day with little or no thought, we are no different from animals. We need stillness and quiet for contemplation.

I use video in English teaching for university students; a well-chosen video can help learners understand the message. Yet some research has shown that video may give students too much information to process. We can apply the same ideas to our everyday life. We enjoy video, yet it gives our brains a lot of information to deal with. Contrast this with a still photo, where we are given a slice of information and have to fill in the rest. Confronted with a photo of two people, we have to interpret the relationship between those people and how they interact with their surroundings. We can study the photo calmly, observe even small details, and tap our creativity by thinking of different possible interpretations.

Psychologists tell us that in order to be content with life, we should surround ourselves with positive images. This is really common sense. If we spend our time with bad people, we will become like them, but if we choose good people, we, too, can become better people. Even if small children are protected at home, when they are taken out to public areas, they encounter many monsters—noise, deafening announcements and cacophonous music, fast-moving traffic and trains, people rushing about, flashing lights, images of actors in bizarre dress and alien make-up. It is no wonder they have nightmares.

Contrast this outside world with what we see inside an Orthodox Church. The walls and even the ceiling may be filled with images of Jesus, Mary, and the Saints. These images do not look like everyday people; otherwise, we might end up thinking of a resemblance to a famous actor or Uncle George. Rather they are symbolic representations of those they portray: fingers and noses are longer, their eyes looking beyond this earthly world. There are, indeed, specific guidelines for painting icons. Some icons tell a whole story, like those of the Nativity of Jesus, where we see not only Mary with the newborn Jesus in the center of the icon, but also the fearful shepherds being greeted by the angel, the three kings, and even Joseph in the lower left corner looking worried (sometimes with an old man, the devil, tempting him with the thought, “That’s not your son.”).



To Orthodox Christians, icons are comforting. We are surrounded by the saints and feel safe in their company. We sit in the church and think of their lives, of the various events in the life of Jesus, and even the negative aspects, such as the crucifixion of Jesus and martyrdom of saints, remind us of the resurrection—our resurrection—and the glory of God. We keep small icons in our homes to remind us continually of God’s goodness, of Mary, the saints and angels, all of whom are our friends and who will help us when we ask, and even when we don’t ask.

When I was a child, I thought the church was the most beautiful place in the town and looked forward to going there every Sunday and holy day. With all the icons, it was so full of color, and there was so much detail for a child to observe, from the golden decorations on Mary’s garments to the matted hair of John the Baptist. I did not understand their theological meaning then, but I felt this was a good place, surrounded by God and His friends, peaceful and safe from the monsters of the outside world. Time stood still, and we escaped to God’s world for a little while.

On the first Sunday after the lunar new year holidays, Hannah’s parents brought her to church. She was wearing a new red Chinese coat that one of her aunts had given her. Talking with her after liturgy, I said, “你的衣服很漂亮。” (Your clothes are very pretty.) Raising her right arm, she pointed to the front of the church, where there were no people, just the altar and the many icons, and she repeated, “漂亮。” (pretty)

Hannah continues to sleep peacefully—and so do I.