



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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Unclogging Our Mental Arteries

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In an essay with a whimsical tone but serious point, Ken Budd told about awakening one morning with Charlie Daniels's song, "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" in his head.

I had barely hit the snooze bar on my alarm when [the song] began playing ... And playing. And playing some more. From breakfast to lunch, afternoon to evening, over and over and over and over, I heard "The Devil Went Down to Georgia." By the end of the day, Johnny had won the Devil's gold fiddle more than 14 billion times.¹

Acknowledging the irritation of repeatedly hearing a song you like, Budd observes that hearing one you don't like is "like an endless attack of mental hiccups." But the problem is not just with popular songs. Commercial jingles and TV themes also take up brain space that would be better left for other things. As Budd put it, "It's no wonder I never learned the state capitals — 'The Devil Went Down to Georgia' is wasting 50 states' brain space."

His elaboration of the problem is the reason I call attention to his musings.

Of course [popular] songs are supposed to get stuck in your head. Hit songs have catchy melodies called hooks. Record companies like hooks because they sell records.... The problem is, those hooks latch on to the subconscious like ticks. Then, suddenly, after many years, they spring to life. One reference—a casual comment, an innocent dream—can trigger a long-buried memory.

If the problem was limited to pop songs, commercial jingles, and TV themes, it would be one thing; not necessarily a good thing, mind you, but not as bad as it could be either. But it's not just song lyrics and jingles that latch on to us, is it? Because we live in an audio-visual world, we have been besieged with millions of images and verbal hooks. Scenes and words depicting violence, crude and disrespectful behavior, sexual content, insolent challenges to authorities and institutions, and other philosophies and ills are everywhere and unavoidable, no matter how much we try to insulate ourselves from them

¹ Ken Budd, "The Hit Parade from Hell," *Smithsonian*, November 1998, 176.

(think, for example, of the commercial that intruded in the middle of that TV program you chose because of its relative wholesomeness). And because they were designed as hooks to latch on to and stick with us, some of the most poisonous images, many from decades ago, are triggered without warning by “a casual comment [or] innocent dream.”

Since thoughts lead to actions, it is no wonder we see the malicious and tragic behaviors that make the headlines, not to mention those we regret. We’re experiencing exactly what Jesus said we would:

And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mark 7.20-23).

But if we’ve been warned about the existence of the problem, we also have available to us the information we need to learn what to do about it. Budd points in the right direction:

I suppose it’s all my fault. If my mind is truly a file cabinet, I’m the one who filled it with trash. Jingles and rock songs are junk food for the mind. They’re greasy and gooey and easy to consume. (The reason no one has Tchaikovsky in their heads is because Tchaikovsky used more than three chords.) For 30 years I’ve maintained a steady diet of cultural Ring Dings. My mental arteries are clogged with “Sugar, Sugar.”

In our world, we can neither erase what we filled our mental file cabinets with in the past nor escape all the assaults on our senses in the present. But we can mitigate the damage by committing to a mental diet that decreases our junk-thought intake while increasing our consumption of healthy fare.

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil 4.8).

*January 1999
Revised March 2023
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