

## The Philosophical Implications of Talking Vegetables

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VeggieTales is something that, on paper, makes no sense at all. It is a series of children's videos where limbless, talking vegetables act out Bible stories.

Try raising money with *that* pitch.

It was created in a spare bedroom by a guy who got kicked out of Bible College after only 3 semesters - for failing chapel. A guy who had no money, no connections, and no idea what he was getting himself into.

And somehow, quite unexpectedly, it became not only the best-selling *Christian* direct-to-video series in history, but ultimately the best-selling direct-to-video series *of any kind*, with more than 40 million videos sold to date. In 1999 and 2000 VeggieTales videos outsold every other kids property in the world, including Barney, Pokemon and Scooby-Doo. Even last year, after 11 years in the market, VeggieTales was Warner Brothers' top-selling kids video series.

But the VeggieTales phenomenon went beyond the sale of videos. Teenagers and college kids embraced Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber. VeggieTales parties sprouted up on college campuses – first at Christian colleges, as you might predict, but then at places like the University of Michigan and Texas A&M.

A CNN poll found VeggieTales among the top-10 most-watched videos on college campuses nationwide. Larry the Cucumber T-shirts were sighted at dance clubs in downtown Chicago. And perhaps most astonishingly, VeggieTales was directly parodied in a 2-minute animated spoof on Saturday Night Live, and referenced in 3 different episodes of The Simpsons.

All of this might lead the casual observer to say, “What the heck?!?”

Well. Telling the complete story of VeggieTales would require much more time than we have before us tonight. Since this is Yale, I decided to craft a shorter version of the story, using very large words. Remembering though that I was kicked out of Bible College before I'd had a chance to learn many very large words, I concluded that my only remaining option was to tell the story simply, using simple words, and chance the consequences.

In the next 20-30 minutes I will focus in on the question I am asked most frequently: What made VeggieTales so successful? Many people who watch the videos would answer, “They're so funny!” But there are many funny things in the world. SpongeBob

is funny. South Park is funny. Saturday Night Live is funny. Jim Carrey is funny. Making people laugh doesn't necessarily create societal impact or launch a phenomenon.

Others would say, "It's the lessons. The great biblical teaching!" The lessons are certainly a part of it, but the majority of American kids under age 12 attend a religious service in any given week, and one would assume they're getting "great biblical teaching" there as well. Yet Sunday School classes don't seem to be launching cultural revolutions at a very prodigious rate.

So what is it? Well, my response would be that VeggieTales succeeded because of the humor and the teaching, but, more specifically, because of a certain *style* of humor and a certain *style* of teaching that, when taken together, met a huge untapped need for a generation whose own attitudes and worldview were in radical upheaval. In other words, it was the right thing in the right place at the right time. It was exactly what people didn't know they were looking for.

Now even though VeggieTales counted fans as diverse as conservative lightning rod Dr. James Dobson, LA-based Jewish talkshow host Dennis Prager and foul-mouthed, controversial film director Kevin Smith, it didn't appeal to everyone. It appealed mostly to people who were a lot like me. So to get to know them, and the dynamics that created one of the more unexpected pop-culture movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, you need to get to know me a little better.

I was born in middle-America. Muscatine, Iowa. My mom was the church choir director – my dad the Sunday School superintendent. My dad was also the head of advertising for the world's largest retreader of tires, and I idolized him. He was funny. He was creative. He could invent hilarious stories off the top of his head and make up songs on the fly. When he started at Bandag Incorporated in the mid-1960's, their advertising consisted of flyers he would write and have printed up to hand out at tradeshow. 12 years later he was buying TV time on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* – the first tire company to do so. He was jetting off to Mexico to shoot TV commercials. For small town Iowa, that was pretty cool!

In 3<sup>rd</sup> grade I invented my own fictitious tire company and laid out my own ads – just like my dad. When he had to give a big presentation at a huge sales conference in Hawaii, I helped him rehearse by working the buttons on four slide projectors as he read the script. When I heard about the standing ovation he got for that presentation, I thought I would bust with pride.

But one night in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade I lay awake in bed, listening to my parents fight in the family room below. And something inside told me that my world was in danger of falling apart. A few months later I stood in the family room as my father kissed me on the forehead, turned, and walked out the door.

I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that every aspect of my life changed that day. How I viewed myself. How I viewed the world around me. How I viewed relationships. My life suddenly split into two halves – the 'before,' and the 'after.' And in the 'after' of my parents' divorce and my dad's departure, everything seemed different.

What does this have to do with VeggieTales? Well, if the experience was unique to me, nothing. But it wasn't. A few years later in high school I was sitting at lunch around a big table with 11 other boys. Somehow the topic of divorce came up, and out of curiosity, we went around the table. 11 out of the 12 boys had seen their parents split up – had watched their father or mother walk away. 11 out of 12.

There were 5 of us living together at Bible College, and when we arrived, 3 out of the 5 had seen their parents' marriages fail. Within 18 months it would be 5 out of 5. The other two were apparently just waiting for their kids to get out of the house so they could call it quits.

We are the children of divorce. Our parents got the 'fun' of the sexual revolution. We got the short end of the stick. At some point in the 1970's, it seems, every parent in America read the book "Looking out for Number One," heard the experts declare that children were "highly resilient," and headed for the door. Actress Meg Ryan watched her mother run off to New York to pursue her "life-long dream" of acting. Early MTV VJ Martha Quinn, when asked why she was such a big fan of the Brady Bunch's "Marsha," grew surprisingly introspective and said "it was because I imagined that's what my life would have been like – had my parents stayed together."

We were the generation that was supposed to "bounce back," but didn't. We left a mark. And we left it everywhere. Who do you think has been writing all the TV shows, all the comic books and most of the movies for the last 15 years? We have. We weren't into Superman. He reminded us too much of what our fathers were supposed to be. We much preferred the X-Men – mutant teenagers that had been rejected by the world. That didn't seem to fit in anywhere. That didn't have a home. I remember being asked in college – "Are you going home for Christmas?" I'd say, "I'm going to my mom's house," or "I'm going to my dad's house." But 'home?' I didn't know where that was. Yep. X-Men. Definitely.

Whereas our parents loved the dry, cocktail party wit of Johnny Carson, we found our patron saint in David Letterman, whose sarcasm and twisted humor taught us that the best way to deal with life was to laugh at everything. To make everything a joke. And David Letterman begat John Kricfalusi and his seminal show "Ren & Stimpy," which begat Mike Judge and his show "Beavis & Butthead," which begat Trey Stone and Matt Parker and their show "South Park." And we had found our voice. We were safe from the world, as long as everything was treated as a joke.

I've often described sarcasm as 'cynical irony.' It is the most caustic form of humor. CS Lewis brilliantly describes sarcasm – which he refers to as 'flippancy' – in The

Screwtape Letters. In it, senior demon “Screwtape” writes to his protégé, describing the various forms of English humor –

“Flippancy is the best of all. In the first place it is very economical. Only a clever human can make a real Joke about virtue, or indeed about anything else; [but] any of them can be trained to talk as if virtue were funny. Among flippant people the Joke is always assumed to have been made. No one actually makes it; but every serious subject is discussed in a manner which implies that they have already found a ridiculous side to it. If prolonged, the habit of Flippancy builds up around a man the finest armour-plating against the Enemy that I know, and it is quite free from the dangers inherent in the other sources of laughter. It is a thousand miles away from joy; it deadens, instead of sharpening, the intellect; and it excites no affection between those who practice it.

Lewis no doubt was describing certain folks he had observed in 1940’s England, but 50 years later his description fit to a “T” the perpetually snickering late 20<sup>th</sup> century American teen raised on David Letterman and personified by Beavis & Butthead.

Some folks believe Vietnam was the source of America’s modern cynicism. Others point to Watergate. But for me and for many others in my generation, the real root, I think, is much closer to home and much more personal. When we were very young, our parents broke their promises. Their promises to each other, and their promises to us. And millions of American kids in a very short period of time learned that the world isn’t a safe place; that there isn’t anyone who won’t let you down; that their hearts were much too fragile to leave exposed. And sarcasm, as CS Lewis put it, “builds up around a man the finest armour-plating... that I know.”

Our grandparents were “the greatest generation.” We became the “most sarcastic.”

And then, in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, things got more complicated. We started having kids of our own. And they wanted to watch TV. Some friends of mine, in an effort to remain loyal to their new worldview, fed their 2 year-old a steady diet of “Ren & Stimpy,” even presenting her with a log for her birthday, in keeping with one of the show’s running jokes. But for most of us, our kids wanted to watch the hottest preschool show on TV in those days – Barney the Dinosaur. And we HATED Barney the Dinosaur.

You see, my generation really doesn’t have a big problem with spirituality, as I’ll discuss later. What my generation does have a big problem with – is sincerity. Taking things seriously; being earnest; talking about things as if they really, really mattered. If David Letterman and Beavis & Butthead were on one end of the continuum, Barney the Dinosaur sat squarely on the other. When he started singing the “I love you, you love me” song, we wanted to vomit.

(As an aside, it’s interesting to note that my generation *didn’t* have a huge problem with Mr. Rogers, an equally over-sincere, under-ironic children’s star. Why? I think it is

because he predated our loss of innocence. He was a prelapsarian icon. We associated him with the period of our childhoods when our parents were together. When our homes weren't broken. When the world still seemed warm and inviting. Appearing in the early 1990's however, Barney seemed like a delusional intrusion into our now cynical world.)

As confounding as it was to see our kids embrace this ridiculously "un-ironic" dinosaur, it did point out something about our new worldview. If everything is a joke, then nothing has meaning. And a meaningless life is, well, kinda depressing. And then one day your two year-old waddles over and sings the "I love you, you love me" song to *you*, and you find yourself inexplicably tearing up. Whoa. Didn't see that coming.

So there we were in the early 1990's – me and my generation. Still bottled up inside our armor of sarcasm but feeling a new longing – visible most clearly in the eyes of our kids – for meaning. For honest emotion. For lives and relationships that actually meant something – that weren't a joke. All across America, millions of new, David Letterman-bred parents, lifted the visors on their armor and cautiously, nervously peaked out. They certainly weren't ready to start babbling to their kids like Barney the Dinosaur, but they knew a life modeled after Beavis & Butthead or South Park wasn't very meaningful. They were looking for a new model.

Before I explain how VeggieTales, for many, met that need, I want to turn to the other half of the discussion – the biblical teaching. In this modern age, awash with cel phones, plasma TV's and Tivo, why would retellings of Bible stories outsell Pokemon and Scooby-Doo?

As VeggieTales was being launched in the early 1990's, video distributors told us quite plainly that it was much too religious for the "real world," and would never succeed outside of the cloistered shelves of Christian bookstores. They advised us to take the Bible verse off the end of each video and remove every reference to God. Make the videos about "life lessons," not biblical lessons, they said, and you might even be able to get these into WalMart.

Well, I was certainly aware that they had more experience in the business than I did, but I really didn't want to teach kids to be more forgiving simply because it would "grease the wheels of society," I wanted to teach kids to be more forgiving because God is always ready to forgive us. I wanted my "life lessons" to have a Christian perspective – to reflect a Christian worldview, if you will. And some gut instinct was telling me that, at least in middle-America, more folks were open to a Christian worldview at that point than at any time in the prior 30 years.

I'm not sure if the term 'worldview' is commonly bandied about at Yale. I know it wasn't universally understood at my company, Big Idea, in the mid-90's. As I was emphasizing the importance of all our stories and communications exhibiting a Christian worldview, I got enough blank stares back from my staff that I decided to write a sort of "white paper" on the subject for everyone. The year I believe was 1998 and I was, for the

first time, trying to articulate on paper what I had instinctively felt for several years: that America was in a transition of worldviews, and that this transition was creating tremendous opportunities to reintroduce the historical claims of Christianity to a culture that had largely written them off.

I'm going to read you a portion of that paper - which was written for a group of animators in Chicago, not academics at Yale. So bear with me.

What is a Christian worldview?

A Christian worldview says this: *There is an Author. We live in a grand story—the triumph of a loving God.* The result of looking at life through a Christian worldview is hope.

What worldviews do most media companies portray?

The two primary views presented in media today are a Modern worldview, and a Postmodern worldview.

A Modern worldview says this: *There is no author, but there are ideals. We live in a grand story—the triumph of reason, evolution and the progress of the human spirit.* Throughout the 20th century many Americans moved away from a Christian worldview. The Modern view was for most a satisfactory exchange, because in it we still found a reason for hope. Instead of hope in a loving Creator, however, now we had hope in progress, technology and the human spirit—the stuff that movies are made of! In fact, wary of the pitfalls of portraying religious beliefs, Hollywood quickly embraced the Modern worldview and is, even now, one of its main proponents. Besides cameos in a few Charlton Heston epics, roles for God in Hollywood dried up with the broad acceptance of the Modern worldview.

Interestingly, the rise— and fall— of the Modern worldview is clearly paralleled in the story of Tomorrowland at Walt Disney's first theme park, Disneyland. Modernism had few bigger fans than Walt Disney, who filled Disneyland with tributes to the triumphs of the "human spirit." With exhibits like the "Carousel of Progress," Tomorrowland was a shrine to Walt's belief that mankind could solve all of its problems through science, technology and human ingenuity. Happy, animatronic families smiled gloriously from their homes-of-the-future as optimistic narration described the utopia that lay "just around the corner!"

In the 30 years since Walt Disney's death, both Tomorrowlands (California and Florida) have undergone numerous updates to keep their "visions-of-the-future" as accurate as possible. The most recent rehabs, however, are something completely different. Instead of yet another promised technological utopia, designers conjured up a romantic homage to Jules Verne... billed as "the future

that never was.” A sentimental, retro future.

What brought on the change? By the early 90’s, it was clear to key park designers that public sentiment was shifting. Instead of looking on Walt’s vision with hopeful awe, crowds were now reacting with cynical derision. They didn’t buy it. The future, it seemed, wasn’t what it used to be. Modernism was failing.

The crowds had good reason to be cynical. Just years away from the fabled 21st century, our papers are full not of headlines about utopia and “flying cars,” but about kids murdering each other for bikes and overpriced sneakers. The families that were supposed to be living on the moon by now are struggling just to find affordable housing on Earth. Diseases we “cured” years ago through “science” and “progress” are springing back to life, carried by germs many times stronger than those that plagued our grandparents. And television, that magical box that was supposed to “enlighten the masses,” has turned out instead to be a cancer—doubling the homicide rate of any culture it enters within 15 years.

Modernism promised hope, but it was a false promise. There are still movies clinging to a Modern worldview (it’s a “feel-good” thing), but fewer and fewer all the time. Disneyland, and the rest of America, is moving on. Enter Postmodernism, the natural outgrowth of our disenchantment with Modernism’s blind optimism.

A Postmodern worldview says this: *There is no author and there are no ideals. There is no grand story.* Gen-X cynicism. Slackers. “Who cares? What difference does it make?” And the ultimate buzzword of the Postmodern generation: “Whatever.”

The transition can be seen in the abundance of movies and TV shows with no clear sense of right and wrong and no visible consequences for good or bad characters. Comic books without hope. Superheroes void of heroism. Postmodernism has swept through popular media like a tidal wave.

Preschool programming today is the last great bastion of Modernism, as most producers try to suspend their cynicism just long enough to write one more episode.... But while Sesame Street and Barney cling desperately to a “hopeful” picture of the world, it isn’t long before kids learn from the evening news and the shows their older siblings are watching that there isn’t much left to be hopeful about.

But what is the impact?

As we are just now learning, a Postmodern worldview results in a child who can’t think of a single good reason why he shouldn’t bring a hunting rifle to school and open fire on his classmates. No good reason. In a cynical, hopeless, postmodern

world, mowing down classmates with a Smith & Wesson has no deeper moral implications than mowing down weeds with a Toro. Sure, society says it's "wrong," but it sounds like fun and heck, Hollywood has taught us to disregard authority anyway. Even the "good" kids, the ones that don't make the headlines, are growing up not just with the fear, but almost the *expectation* that their parents will divorce— that our leaders will inevitably betray us. Cynicism in a child is more than ugly. It's debilitating.

So... what's the point?

Modernism is a lie and Postmodernism will produce a brutal, hopeless world. Yet these are still the predominant worldviews presented in the media. At Big Idea, we have a simple message that all our stories reflect. It is a message for the masses. It is a message that, given the complete failure of the alternatives, may be the next generation's only hope: "God made you special, and he loves you very much." We are part of a grand story. There is hope.

That was my rallying cry in September of 1998. The transition from Modernism to Postmodernism at that point in time was clearly evident in the media – in TV, film, music and advertising. In the mid-1990's AT&T ran one of the last great modernist ad campaigns – the "You Will" campaign, designed to get us excited about our technological future. In one spot, a traveling mother in a business suit stood in a roadside phone booth, staring at the crisp screen of a futuristic videophone. On the screen, her baby smiled back, held up to the videophone by some unseen "caregiver." The narrator intoned: "Have you ever tucked your baby in over the phone? You will."

I saw that commercial 3 or 4 times and each time wanted to leap off the couch and yell, "No I won't!! You can't make me!!" Apparently I was not alone. After a couple of weeks, AT&T pulled the entire campaign from the air.

A few years later the groundbreaking postmodern theater troupe "The Blue Man Group" hilariously parodied that AT & T campaign with lines like, "Have you ever driven a metal spike into your own head? You will."

Madison Avenue got the message. The days of selling technology as "savior" were over.

Shortly thereafter I was walking through O'Hare Airport when I saw this ad for a large consulting firm: A Japanese technician in a labcoat sat on a small stool with his head and arms buried in a sea of cables – the backside of a huge wall of equipment – apparently searching for something. The copy read, "Never before has man had access to so much technology. Never before has man been so thoroughly confused."

That ad resonated with me. The difference between those two ads illustrates the dramatic shift in worldview America experienced at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Who were the parents who found repulsive the thought of tucking in their children over a videophone?

My generation. Who were the parents who started laughed at Walt Disney's Modernism as they brought their own kids to Disneyland in the early 1990's? My generation.

Madison Avenue quickly discovered that the only way to sell to my generation was to act like you didn't want to sell to my generation, thereby giving rise to the single-most overused marketing technique of the last decade: the passionless pitch person. You've heard them a million times in TV and radio commercials. A voiceover actor or actress with absolutely no enthusiasm in their delivery whatsoever – sounding like they'd rather be ANYWHERE than in this voiceover booth recording this commercial. The voice that resonates with my generation is a voice that doesn't believe in what it's selling. A voice that, in other words, has lost hope.

Madison Avenue caught on quickly. Their iterative loop cycle-time is quite short.

Hollywood is slower to react. Still, by the late 1990's Hollywood studios were working hard to figure out what exactly a commercially-viable postmodern film looked like.

Witness "Reality Bites" and other Gen-X slacker movies. And a fairly ambitious film called "Pleasantville," which seemed to end with the message, "the world is a mess... your parents will split up... nothing will turn out the way you had hoped... and that's – okay." I remember describing it at the time as Hollywood's first attempt at a "feel-good postmodern film." I for one, walked out of the theater saying, "if that's what life is like, that isn't okay! That sucks!!" Given the film's poor performance at the box office, my reaction was apparently not uncommon.

You see, unlike with TV commercials, people go to the movies to hear a story. And the stories we like the most are those brimming with hope – the stories that make us feel good about life.

If Hollywood was selling postmodernism, America wasn't buying. (At least outside of the major urban centers and the Sundance Film Festival.) There were still those that were clinging to their beloved modernity like the jilted lover that refuses to let go, and there were those "hip urbanites" insisting that postmodern arthouse films weren't depressing, but rather "edgy and challenging." But a growing audience was looking for something new. Or rather, something old. If technology couldn't give us hope, maybe God could. Maybe, after all these years, religion wasn't as "dorky" as we thought.

The amazing thing about postmodern man, is that he is a man, once again, in search of a savior.

It started happening in the sciences, as real scientists – not just the southern Baptist variety – in growing numbers began wondering if, in fact, the complexities of creation suggested – even demanded – a creator. Megachurches like Willowcreek near Chicago and Saddleback near Los Angeles dropped some of the historical formalities of church and found themselves attracting thousands... then tens of thousands.

Schools and churches in our inner cities wondered if the values kids clearly needed might have a little more moral weight if they were once again linked to an authority higher than the local school board.

A tiny little book about a tiny little Old Testament prayer sold 6 million copies and sat atop the New York Times bestseller chart for weeks. A slightly larger book describing the purpose a Christian worldview gives to life sold 25 million copies and became the bestselling hardback book in US history.

And new moms and dads all across the country felt the need – whether they could explicitly articulate it or not – for a little help in introducing their kids to this very new yet very old worldview.

It was at this point in American history that I sat down to come up with *my kids'* show. I'd love to say I had researched all these macro-trends and began my work focus-group data in hand. But I'd be lying. In truth, I sat down in 1992 to make a kids' show that I would want to watch with my kids. That would work for me. That would have sincerity in it, but not too much. That would mix what I loved about Monty Python and David Letterman with what I hungered for from Thomas Aquinas and Mother Theresa.

I assumed there were others, at least in Middle-America, that were wrestling with similar issues and would also embrace such a product. But I'll be the first to admit I had no idea if that would mean 10 others or 10 million.

In reality, VeggieTales met the needs of a huge audience because there was a huge audience that looked a lot like me: Children who were deeply affected by the fall-out of the sexual revolution; who were now having children of their own. Rejecting their parents' morals and their parents' modernity. Cloaked in self-protective sarcasm but hungry for meaning – as long as it was really, really funny. And not at all like Barney. And at the same time, hungry for a worldview that would give their kids a reason to smile. To hope.

What I came up with was a kids' show whose delicate balance between irony and sincerity was dubbed by one film critic “irreverent reverence.” A show that presented a Christian worldview in such an appealing way that an atheist film critic was moved to write, “as much as I dislike Christianity, VeggieTales makes perhaps the most compelling argument for it since Lewis and Chesterton.” A kids show that ended each episode, after a half-hour of pop-culture references and inspired looniness, with a tomato and a cucumber staring straight into the camera and saying, “Always remember, God made you special and he loves you very much.”

This was not a generation tempted by atheism or enraptured with the potential of human ingenuity. This was a generation content to wallow in a postmodern funk. Content, that

is, until we looked into the eyes of our own children. At which point we became a generation hungry to return to God, but horribly befuddled about how or where to begin.

One day in the mid-90's I was sitting in a restaurant in Los Angeles, having lunch with the head of a major Hollywood production company. About my age, he had been hired by Jim Henson right out of Harvard Business School. He summed it up like this: "My mother was Jewish, my father Presbyterian, and I married a Catholic. My wife and I have no idea what to teach our kids. The only thing we can agree on – is VeggieTales."

For my generation, it was like Mr. Rogers and Monty Python sharing a milkshake. Like David Letterman and Billy Graham's love child.

It was exactly what they didn't know they were looking for.

And that, to the best of my knowledge, is why VeggieTales was so successful.