

MEDIA MINDFULNESS

INTEGRATING FAITH AND MEDIA FOR EFFECTIVE MISSIONARY DISCIPLESHIP

Sr Hosea Rupprecht, FSP

The time we spend with media of one sort or another every day continues to grow as we depend on our digital devices more and more to keep us organized, in touch with others, on the right road, informed, or entertained. As people who take our faith seriously and would say, if asked, that God is the center of our lives, how does our practice of the faith and our use of media technologies connect and intertwine? Do they? Or is faith one part of our lives and media another? How can our media experiences actually help us become closer to God rather than hinder that relationship?

As people of faith, we want to embrace the concept of 'mindfulness' and the responsibility it implies regarding how we use and interact with media and digital technology. Media messages come at us from every corner, including the many social media platforms available today. Before watching a YouTube video on how to kill the weeds in the patio cracks, we see an advertisement. Product placement in movies and TV shows sell us products as we watch a story unfold. Video games run the gamut of innocent to violent. The rising prevalence of TikTok and the videos found on that platform range from the weird, funny, ridiculous, and mostly harmless to the scandalous, immoral, dangerous, and cringingly influential.

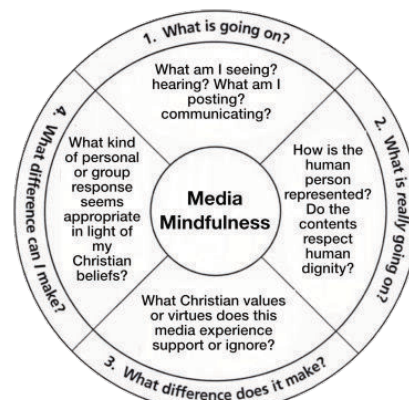
Media messages contain points of view, values and behaviors that may or may not be values or ways of living that we ascribe to as followers of Christ. How do we as parents, educators, church ministers, and other concerned people address the multitude of media messages that assail, not only our children and teenagers, but ourselves as well? How do we wade through all these messages and let our values as Christians drive the media choices we make? By being mindful of the media we encounter and letting our faith come into play as we watch, listen, read, play, or post.

This article introduces the inquiry-based strategy called Media Mindfulness. This strategy gives us a way to ask questions of media and decide what to do with a media message in light of our faith. This methodology doesn't just involve thinking about media messages but goes a step further and asks how a media experience can influence our

actions and choices as people of faith. The Media Mindfulness Strategy (MMS) is helpful for all people of faith, but especially for parents and catechists who want to help children live and grow into faithful missionary disciples of Jesus Christ in today's world.

The strategy, first articulated by Sister Gretchen Hailer, RSHM, in *Believing in a Media Culture*, was born from the ancient practice of *lectio divina* and the process called theological reflection. Each of these reflective practices has their own starting point. *lectio divina* starts with a Scripture passage and theological reflection begins with life experience. The Scripture or experience is reflected upon in the light of the Holy Spirit and we ask ourselves, "what is God saying to me through this?" The last step of each process asks us to make a resolution to follow or decide on some concrete action to take: how can I put what I've learned from my reflection into practice in a concrete, practical manner?

The MMS follows the same format but uses a different starting point. The starting point is any media text— a film or film clip, television show, popular song, magazine article, advertisement, podcast, social media post, TikTok video, Facebook post, video game, web comic – whatever. Then we ask four questions of the media text:



media mindfulness

By using this strategy, kids (as well as grown-ups) learn not to take media messages at face value. Each question leads a person deeper and deeper into the media text and its meaning and then asks us to be mindful, to take responsibility for our choices regarding media and let the media we choose to experience help us grow spiritually to be the best followers of Jesus that we can be.

QUESTION ONE: WHAT IS GOING ON?

To present the Media Mindfulness Strategy, we'll need a media text to work with. Since many people have seen the original Toy Story film from 1995 (this is the best of the Pixar films, after all!), let's use a clip from that film to demonstrate the process.

The clip can be found on YouTube by searching for "Toy Story The Toys Meet Buzz Lightyear." The clip is about 4 ½ minutes long. Please watch it before continuing. *(Just a reminder that if you're doing the MMS with a group, make sure the media text, as well as the questions you ask, are age-appropriate.)*

To delve into the message a media text presents us, we first need to ask what's going on. What am I seeing? What am I hearing, playing, or reading? What story is being told? Who is involved? How are they behaving? What are they doing?

In this first question of the strategy, we simply aim to become aware of the media text itself, the story it's telling and the way it tells the story. In our clip from Toy Story, what is going on? There are several levels to this question. We can make certain conclusions about the film as a whole, even from a short clip. For example, we have an animated film as opposed to a live-action film. It's also geared toward children rather than adults.

Another part of what's going on is the setting and the characters. We find out in this clip that the setting is Andy's room, specifically the bed, which is Woody's spot. Besides Woody, who seems to be in charge, there's the new toy, Buzz Lightyear, who doesn't seem to know that he's a toy from his answers to the questions from the other toys. The other toys gather around Buzz and Woody and ply the newcomer with all kinds of questions in a welcoming manner.

The next level is to ask what's going on in the story. The temptation with the first question is to move too quickly into the second by assigning feelings and motivations to the characters. Stick to what you can see and observe without making other conclusions. What's going on? Well, all the toys are having a conversation. They're welcoming a new toy to the group. As the toys talk to Buzz, Woody drifts into the background. Then there's a bit of a showdown as Woody ridicules Buzz about his gadgets. The toys ask Buzz to demonstrate his abilities, of which he seems mighty proud, and Buzz does so to many oohs and ahhs from the toys and some disgust from Woody.

What's going on also involves how the characters do what they do. Are they likable as characters? What kind of characteristics do they show? Question One is simple: what's going on? At this point in the strategy, we only ask what. It's later that we begin asking why.

Because Question One is straightforward, that doesn't mean it's unimportant. The answers to the questions posed in "what is going on?" all contribute to providing the basic information we need in order to go deeper into the media text with the second question of the MMS: What is really going on?

QUESTION TWO: WHAT IS REALLY GOING ON?

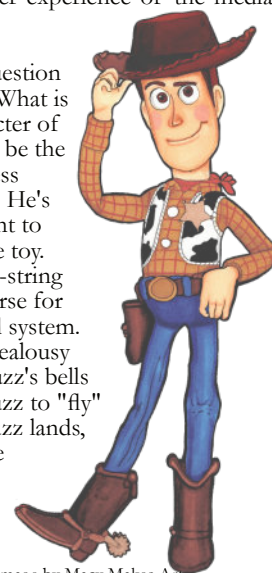
The question, "what is really going on?" is also a multi-layered question. This question takes us a step deeper into engaging with media messages than the first did. By answering the first question, "what is going on?" we discover the content and context of the media message: setting, characters, story. The question "What is really going on?" leads us deeper by asking about how the message conveys its meaning. How is the media text getting its message across? What underlying techniques are being used to present the message? For whom is the message intended and how do you know?

Another layer to the second question of "what is really going on?" is discovering why what is going on is going on. We try to "read between the lines," if you will, to look at the elements of the story, the lifestyles and behaviors of the characters and discover what they mean. We can also look into what feelings are being displayed by the characters as well as what is motivating them to act as they are. What is causing the feelings? What kind of attitudes do the characters have? Are they people you would want to be friends with and why or why not? What motivates the choices they make in the story? Why does a particular character act a certain way and not some other in the media story? These are only a few examples of the kinds of questions that can be asked of a media text to discover "what is really going on?"

An added element of this second MMS question is to ask about what's missing? Who is missing from the story and why? For example, if you're watching a movie focused on teens, often parents are missing from or peripheral to the narrative. Who might be in the story but is marginalized for some reason? What ethnic groups or genders are or are not represented in the story? Does the representation reflect the reality of society? What do the answers to these questions tell us about the creators of the story and how they see the world?

As you can tell, asking this question of "what is really going on?" can take a conversation about any media text in a million different directions depending on who's participating. Different people will notice different things about the media text and draw different conclusions. This fact actually enriches conversation around media messages as each person shares his or her experience of the media text.

Now, let's look at the second question with our Toy Story media text. What is really going on? With the character of Woody, we see that he seems to be the "adult" and the other toys are less mature. What is Woody feeling? He's jealous of Buzz and doesn't want to lose his status as Andy's favorite toy. He's self-conscious that his pull-string activated voice box is a little worse for wear compared to Buzz's sound system. One toy refers to "laser envy." Jealousy motivates Woody to demean Buzz's bells and whistles and challenging Buzz to "fly" with his plastic wings. When Buzz lands, Woody has to "eat crow" (as the expression goes).



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Let's look at Buzz now. Buzz is confused by his surroundings and is nothing but polite when he meets Woody and asks for help. He's innocently trying to figure out what's going on in his new environment. When Woody doesn't show much of a welcoming spirit, the other toys do, and Buzz responds to their inquisitiveness by demonstrating his "laser" and his flying ability. He seems to be motivated by pride, though, a bit of a show-off, and thumbs his nose (figuratively) at Woody when he sticks the landing.

What about representation? There are boys and girls represented among the toys in this clip. There are what could be considered adults and children among the toys. In the film, we see Andy's mom but never his dad. The short clip we're using as a text doesn't have much ethnic diversity but does the rest of the film?

An interesting element of this clip is when the toys ask Buzz where he's from. One says, "I'm from Playskool" and another says, "I'm from Mattel," and then goes on to explain that it's not really Mattel but a smaller company that was purchased in a buy-out. Most kids won't have a clue what this means but this bit of dialogue makes it fun for the parents and gives a commentary on commercialism and how it works in our society.

All the things pointed out as possible answers to Question Two show how the strategy is leading us deeper into the meaning of the media text.

These first two questions of the MMS, "what is going on?" and "what is really going on?" focus on unpacking the media text itself and this can be a very enjoyable exercise. Don't, however, get bogged down here with the first two questions. They are only the beginning and lay the foundation for us to now engage the media text with the ideals and values of our Christian faith when we ask Question Three: "what difference does it make?"

QUESTION THREE: WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

The third question, "What difference does it make?" asks us to put our discernment hats on. We discern in the media text the values and points of view present. What Christian values does the text support or ignore? Does the story told in the media text deal with things like respect, human dignity, kindness, forgiveness, reconciliation, community, honesty, integrity or family? Are other values present? How do the characters embody these values? What does the story say about the effect of living these values?

Values in everyday life

I don't know too many people who wake up in the morning and say to themselves, "I'm going to live according to my values today!" Values/virtues are the guiding lights that drive our thoughts and actions, but they are so much a part of ourselves that we don't often think about them. People can be generally kind, positive, understanding, or honest but they can also be impatient, selfish, and petty. We all have core values that we try to live by, but we don't always do such a great job at it. That's why reconciliation and forgiveness is so important. None of us are perfect.

Why focus so much on values when questioning a media text? Because values are the building blocks of character development that do so much to determine the way we think and act on a regular basis. If integrity is one of your core

values, for example, then you will approach life with honesty and truthfulness. When we see the values we hold reflected in media stories we can be inspired by those stories and they can give us courage to live out those values in our everyday lives. On the other hand, we can be turned off when the media we experience exhibits values contrary to the ones we hold. Truth be told, most media stories have both positive and negative values. That's where discernment comes in.

Discerning values to make good media choices

By asking "What difference does it make?" of a media text we identify the values that are often taken for granted. This exercise helps us choose media that exhibit the values we cherish. For example, in our clip from Toy Story, we see positive values such as welcoming, showing interest in someone, community, and conversation that helps the characters understand each other better. In the same clip, we see negative "values" such as jealousy, arguing, selfishness, and pride.

Conflicting values in media stories are why discernment and conversation is so important. By using the MMS and identifying the values, positive and negative, in a media text, gives us the opportunity to think/talk about our values. Especially when doing the strategy with kids, we can talk about why we would want to embody the positive values, such as the way the toys welcome newcomer Buzz and why we try our best NOT to exemplify negative values such as the way Woody shows jealousy of Buzz and then argues with him about the ability to fly.

Don't shy away from media with negative values (as long as it's age-appropriate)

Especially in a faith-based setting, we might be afraid to show a specific media text because it has something "bad" in it. If the clip is age-appropriate, don't shy away from using it. What's so wonderful about the Media Mindfulness Strategy is that when we can identify negative values in media, it gives us the opportunity to talk about those values with our children or our students and discern more deeply for ourselves. It's much easier to talk about the positive values. Those are things we want to have in our lives. It's more of a challenge to look closely at the negative values and talk about those. For example, a conversation might be started by asking if anyone has ever felt like Woody did when Buzz "took" his spot on the bed. Older siblings are sometimes jealous of the attention given to younger ones by parents. No one likes to admit that maybe they've felt jealous or acted selfishly at one time or another but talking about it can bring ideas up about how to act if a person ever found themselves in a similar situation. It's the striving to live according to the values of Christ that really matters.

So what does all this mean?

With the question "What difference does it make?" we bring our faith into conversation with the media. We discern the values, both positive and negative, in the media text and we think/pray about whether or not we want to integrate those values into our daily living. The specifics of how we go about doing that are the purview of the fourth question: "What difference can I make?"

discipleship

QUESTION FOUR: WHAT DIFFERENCE CAN I MAKE?

This is perhaps the most difficult of the questions to answer. It's also the most important. To use an old cliché, this is where the rubber meets the road. Question Four challenges us to put the values of our faith into practice in concrete ways.

In the MMS, the final question: what difference can I make? asks us what we are going to do with the values we identified in our media text. Do we want to integrate them into our lives? If so, how? If not, why not and how can we avoid acting out of the negative values?

What does this mean for me?

Just like in *lectio divina*, upon which the MMS is based, we are asked to make an active response to praying with a particular scripture passage, so with this question we allow the media text and our reflection upon it, to challenge us to live better lives of Christian discipleship. Question Four says, "What response seems appropriate in light of my Christian beliefs?" Another way of putting it might be, "How do you plan on putting those values (the ones you identified in question three) into practice in your life, here and now?" What is God calling you to do, concretely and specifically, as a result of engaging this particular media text with your faith?

The temptation here is to remain with the media text itself. It's really easy to say, "Oh, well, this character should have done this instead of that" or "the decision that character made was probably not the best way to settle the conflict." It's much more difficult to actually commit to some action in your own life that embodies some of the values you saw in the media text.

Once I was leading a group through the strategy using a clip from the movie, *The Impossible*. We did Questions One, Two, and Three just fine. But when we got to Question Four, one person kept saying things like, "Well, I think Lucas was great. He was very caring." I kept asking him how he could be more caring and he would say, "Well, Lucas stuck with his mom through the whole thing." He couldn't make the leap from the media text and the character of Lucas in the film to something he could do to increase caring in his own life.

Getting specific, really specific

What might be some answers to this question from our Toy Story clip? One of the positive values of the clip was community. I'm an introvert so I tend to recharge by being alone. Socializing is a challenge for me. My answer to "what difference can I make?" might be to step out of my comfort zone, especially in a social setting, such as a Church gathering, and approach a stranger and introduce myself, welcoming them to the gathering.

Another thing that happened in the film clip was the conversation about the origin of products, such as being made in Taiwan or Hong Kong. I might choose to look deeper into some product I use on a regular basis to make sure it's being made in an ethical way. For example, I might look at my coffee's origin and consider moving to a fair trade brand, if mine is not.

How might a child answer this question? As I mentioned above sometimes kids feel jealous of other kids and act selfishly. Maybe a child's answer to Question Four would be to share more with his or her siblings or friends. Another idea would be to welcome a new student at school and invite him or her to sit with them and their friends at lunch. They could even engage in conversation to find out more about the newcomer.

When you do the MMS with groups, you'll find that there are as many answers to Question Four as there are people in the room. Answers will be specific to each person and what he or she feels that God is calling him or her to do as a result of engaging a particular media text.

Be sure to make a commitment to actually do whatever it is you came up with in Question Four. If we only say the action but never do it, we have missed an opportunity for growth, much like a New Year's resolution that gets forgotten by January 10th.

Once, I watched the movie *Woman in Gold*, which is the story behind the Gustav Klimt painting "Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I," and I decided that my answer to Question Four was to go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (I lived in New York at the time) and try to look at the art and appreciate the artist and what he or she was trying to convey. But I never went. That's not to say that I don't appreciate art a bit more than before I watched the film, but I never followed through to do what I said I would do. Yes, a missed opportunity.

By answering Question Four for ourselves and actually doing whatever God inspires us to do, we put our faith into practice in a concrete way. The amazing thing about this is that it all started with a media story, a product of our secular culture.

CONCLUSION

We are people of faith who live in a culture saturated with media messages that, more often than not, have nothing to do with our lived faith. How do we discern what media to consume? How do we bring our faith into conversation with the media we encounter? How do we deal with the craziness that social media can bring into our lives and the lives of children in our care? The answer is not to erase media from our lives. That's pretty much impossible. So, what do we do? Become more mindful media users and engage the media we do choose to enjoy with critical thinking skills by asking questions. This is especially important when teaching our children about media and working with them to develop and use critical thinking when they engage with media, especially social media.

Be media mindful

The Media Mindfulness Strategy is meant to help all of us, both adults and kids, to be mindful when choosing what media we will watch, read, listen to, or play. Most media has a combination of both positive and negative values. When we can identify the positive values, the strategy can help us integrate those values into our everyday living in specific ways. Identifying the negative values can help us enter into conversation with others, but especially kids, as to why we don't want to integrate the negative values into our lives. We can talk about how the negative values can sometimes look good or normal and be tempting. We can talk about ways to act out the positive values that are opposite to the negative ones.

By being mindful of the media we choose and bringing that media into conversation with our faith, we become more discerning disciples of Jesus Christ, always striving to discover what God is asking of us every moment of every day, including the time we spend with media, and then acting according to God's will to the best of our ability.

Contact Pauline Media Studies to schedule a Media Mindfulness workshop for your parish or diocesan catechists, parents, clergy, religious, ministry leaders, or interested laity: