

He's the saint who shuns TV

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By **Bill Hall of the Tribune**



Commentary

When I hear someone boasting that "I never watch television," as I did the other day, I always want to ask a few cheeky questions:

Have you also forsaken electric lights?

Do you use indoor plumbing?

How long does it take you to drive your buggy to work?

When your foot gets infected, do you refuse modern cures like antibiotics? Do you remain true to your old standby, rubbing bat mucus and cobwebs on that pesky foot?

If you don't watch television, do you ever listen to that new-fangled gadget, the radio?

Do you write letters with a quill pen or do you use those satanic invitations to wasting time, the computer, the Internet and e-mail?

Do you read parchment scrolls instead of books?

Granted, a person can overdose on television and on other wicked attributes of modernity like electric lights and modern bathrooms. Television, like most such distractions - including ping pong, booze and compulsive knitting - can devour your life if you don't show some self-discipline. But contrary to the eccentrics who boast they don't watch television at all, some of the fare on television can be a tool of learning every bit as much as a newspaper, a magazine, a book, a teacher's lecture or a conversation with your wise old grandmother.

Granted, there is no greater means of becoming an expert on everything than reading newspaper columnists. But best of all is a combination of newspapers, books, magazines,

the Internet and television, especially television. A still picture is worth a thousand words so television - moving pictures - is worth at least another 500.

A person who walks up to strangers saying, "I never watch television," might as well add, "but don't ask me what has happened in the last few hours in Arizona, Egypt or the other side of town, because I don't dirty my eyes on something as common as television."

A person who doesn't watch some television news and documentaries is not as broadly informed as the rest of us. The poor yokel should be hiding the fact, not boasting about it.

Of course, it's true that a person watching television to inform himself might slip into the broader clutches of the medium and watch a useless football game or a fattening cooking show or, worst of all, some sit-com that doesn't do anything but make him laugh. Too much laughter could kill a person.

And television can certainly be addictive. In fact, television news is a potential gateway drug. You start out with just a little nibble here and there of MSNBC and FOX and maybe a little taste of ABC news now and then. Then one day, you find that's not enough. Suddenly you're watching CNN's Wolf Blitzer and the best political junkies on television.

Once you've gone that far, you easily tumble into Oprah and then all the way down into the clutches of her evil prot ◆ g ◆, Doctor Phil!

And try as you might, you're going to have a lot of trouble persuading anyone or even yourself that you aren't actually watching some television simply for entertainment. That includes singing and dancing, not to mention every form of fun from baseball to ballet.

When it goes that far, I can understand the urge to quit television altogether and make a nuisance of yourself grabbing strangers by the lapels and proclaiming, "I never watch television."

That habit is familiar to me. I sometimes shout proudly into the faces of frightened strangers, "I haven't had a cigarette in 34 years!"

It's an impulse like that of people in large cities who stand on street corners screaming their newfound love of Jesus at passing strangers. A thing like that can be disconcerting to the general public. But whether it's sinning, smoking or watching television, what's the point of becoming pure and superior if you don't let the pathetic backsliders know about it?

Of course, it's always possible to be a relatively decent person and live a happy, useful life without becoming a pompous twit who lives in transparent fear of his own addictive tendencies toward television.

In the first place, many of those who say they never watch television are fibbing, mostly to themselves. They are like those people who will tell you they have quit smoking when,

in fact, what they mean is that they sneak only about nine cigarettes a day when nobody is looking.

At least that's what I heard on television.

Hall is editor emeritus of the Tribune's opinion page. His e-mail address is wilberth@cableone.net.