IS IT NECESSARY TO THE PLOT?
By Susan Vogt
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I went to a movie the other night. Even paid full price, which is a rarity for me since I usually wait for it to come out on video or at least go to a matinee. It was a great movie! So what am I complaining about?

At the risk of sounding like an old fogy (I also just turned 50 so this is not a frivolous risk in the eyes of my teenagers), I found myself wondering if the sex or violence on the screen was really necessary. Here are the details. You be the judge.

Before the main feature even started, there were previews. No surprise here. But even though it's been awhile since I've seen a movie in a theater, I was surprised by the excessive violence that permeated all the previews which were "approved for PG audiences". Now my kids will say that I'm just a wimp and have a low tolerance for violence. I say, there's something wrong with an industry that keeps raising the ante of violence in the media so that it takes a bigger and bigger dose to get the same shock effect. It's like becoming addicted to alcohol or drugs. It keeps taking a larger dose to achieve the same high. Yes, I know the common refrain of "Well I watched plenty of shoot-em-up westerns or horror pictures when I was a kid and I turned out OK." Well, maybe you did, but I don't think our society came out unscarred. The research in this field indicates that although a child in a basically healthy, loving family can often withstand the influence of violence in the media, it does have a negative effect on more vulnerable children. Like it or not, we are now living (and dying) in a world in which many people do not respect human life. We can live in a relatively safe neighborhood, but we can't protect ourselves 100% from needy or crazy people with guns and bombs. If other children are growing up tolerating higher and higher doses of violence as normal, our own lives and children are still at risk of being a victim if not a perpetrator. Add to this the fact that the graphic violence in today's media has escalated significantly since the days of Roy Rogers and Gun Smoke. So I ask myself, "Was this degree of graphic violence necessary to the plot, or was it only included to increase the shock value?"

But so much for the previews, the movie was "Contact" and I loved the movie. I thought it was very stimulating and thought provoking. It had a spiritual message which was nicely subtle. It didn't preach, but posed questions about the creation of humanity and God's role in it. But here's the catch – there was one brief intimate scene of the unmarried leading woman and man in bed together. Now it wasn't pornographic, in fact it was done in good taste, but the question I keep asking myself is, "Was it necessary to the plot?" I'm not a prude and I know that in real life many people do not believe that it is important to connect sexual intimacy with the permanent commitment of marriage, but I also know how difficult it is to raise children even with two loving, committed parents. As I reflected on the story line, it was clear to me that the plot could have worked equally well without the implied sexual relationship. All that was necessary was that the viewer realize that this couple cared deeply about each other in a romantic way.

Now, it didn't spoil the movie for me. I still enjoyed it and recommend it to others. In fact I'm not too worried about our older children's reaction to it. Although there are no guarantees, over the years we've talked about the wisdom of sexual intimacy being connected with the marriage commitment, but we don't live on a deserted island. But, I'm wondering what

messages are being ingrained in the minds and hearts of the potential marriage partners for our children.

On a more immediate level, I would have liked to have recommended this movie to our 11year old. It easily would have worked for a much broader age range if it hadn't been for the gratuitous bedroom scene. Need I even add the TV dimension of shows like "Friends" and "Sex in the City." The shows might be artful and funny but they normalize sex without commitment and violence without consequences.

What all these musings confirm in me is that even the most vigilant parent has a difficult job today and instead of society supporting this role, regretfully it contributes to the numbing of our moral sensibilities. But who is "society" other than a whole bunch of *us*. I find myself frustrated because the solution is bigger than what one family can do to protect themselves. Even if I monitor TV, movies, video games, and sexually explicit fare, other children will still be exposed to it and that will impact my family. That's not enough. Somehow, the media needs a communal response. The traditional ways to influence a big business are things like product boycotts, writing to sponsors, and talking to our own children about our values. These methods are slow and often tangible changes are hard to see. Indeed, TV has taught us that almost any problem can be solved in 30 minutes (including commercials).

So what's a parent to do? Put draconian limits on the media we watch? Fret and complain? Put our children in solitary confinement till they are 21? Move to a commune in Antarctica? Give up? Capitulate?

I'm afraid the only feasible step is to admit it will take some energy and we can't do it alone. V chips are good. Household limits are good. But we get the media we are willing to pay for. If a critical mass of viewers say we're not going to watch or pay for shows that throw in gratuitous sex or excessive violence we could make a difference. One family can't do it alone. It takes a community.