

It's 8:00 on a Monday night, and I am sitting at home in my bedroom peacefully reading a novel. Suddenly, the dreaded call comes, "Kris, you been in that room for two hours. Come on out here and be with the family for a while. *Cosby* is going to start in five minutes. Don't you want to watch it with us?" This predictable Monday night call from my dad reveals one of the ways families use television viewing. It is supposed to be "quality" time, where real families gather together to watch fictional families in sitcoms like *Cosby*. Now it may be true that in some families people actually interact while they are watching television, discussing the meaning of recent news or sharing in the victory or defeat of their favorite team. But in families like mine, television too often means evading each other by replacing real families with fictional ones.

When my family watches television together, what we share is not the experience of actual family members but episodes in the fictional lives of television families. One of the effects of watching these television families is that we use the actors and actresses to do our work for us. The fictional families offer television viewers vicarious experiences that can substitute for real experience. People, for example, remember it is Thursday and at 5:00 they can watch the heartwarming merger of the blended family *Full House*. Yet, without a calendar, they have a difficult time remembering that this particular Monday is their stepmother's or stepfather's birthday and they should get a card of gift on the way home from work or school. Television viewers can tell you that the hot couple on *Melrose Place* is headed for divorce more easily than they can see the status of their own marriages. People may not have noticed, but fiction has become stronger than reality.

Perhaps the greatest attraction to fictional television families is that, unlike real families, they can solve their problems in hour or half-hour segments. On TV, blended families always

work out, drug addicts are always treated, and no one is ever hurt permanently. It's easy. Just follow the script and everything will be fine. After all, if you're watching TV, you won't fight (except over who has the remote). If you don't fight, no one can get hurt and everyone will be happy. So we let the TV characters do our fighting for us because they always make up on the half hour.

In my family, watching television families work things out doesn't bring us closer together. Instead of being shared quality time, our experiences as television viewers brings about a sense of failure and demoralization. Even though no one says so, we all know we'll never measure up to the television families. Our lives are messier, and our problems seem to persist no matter how much we watch *Cosby*.