



A Time to Remember “Leave it to Beaver” and the America We Left Behind

This past Saturday, Barbara Billingsley passed away at the age of 94. For those of you scratching your heads but acquainted with 1950s television, Billingsley played the ever-gracious and loving, hearth-and-home mother June Cleaver in the classic sitcom “Leave It to Beaver.”



The show, a hit that ran from 1957 to 1963, is a true slice of Americana. It entertained audiences with the innocent mischief-making and misadventures of its main character, Theodore Cleaver (played by Jerry Mathers), an endearing boy who went by the nickname “Beaver.” With his mother, June; his brother, Wally (Tony Dow); and his father, Ward (Hugh Beaumont), they were the ideal American family.

And, as Internet postings attest, June Cleaver was the mother so many young fans wanted to have. Always loving, kind, and patient, she was truly the heart of her home.

To Billingsley’s credit, it appears this was more than just an on-screen persona, too. Said her son Glenn Billingsley, “She was every bit as nurturing, classy, and lovely as ‘June Cleaver’ and we were so proud to share her with the world.” As for her younger on-screen son, now 62-year-old Jerry Mathers, he [called her](#) a “dear friend” and [said](#), “Barbara was a patient advisor and teacher. She helped me along this challenging journey through life by showing me the importance of manners and respect for others.”

And, really, it can be said that *Leave it to Beaver (LITB)* did this for its audience. The show was one of the last examples of what I would call “virtue television,” something that, sadly, has been transformed from the default to dead genre. Unlike today’s sitcom fare, there was no sexual innuendo; the 12-year-old boys still found girls “icky” (as opposed to being little Casanovas); and Hollywood hadn’t yet been overcome by the strange notion that sassy, wise-cracking brats are somehow cute. Why, even the show’s bad boy, the self-serving, unctuous Eddie Haskell (Ken Osmond), knew enough to be respectful around adults. (Point of interest: Osmond [became a motorcycle cop](#) in Los Angeles in 1970 and was shot three times while trying to apprehend a car thief; he was saved by his bulletproof vest and belt buckle.)

It also was the time before the feminist anti-sex-stereotyping police, when traditional sex roles were still reflexively portrayed and fathers weren’t cast as buffoons (strangely, this consistent attempt to negatively stereotype men is accepted today). Thus, June was the very picture of femininity, and, while I don’t know if everybody really loves Raymond, everyone respected Ward. He was the head of his household and a strong, virtuous father who would often impart life lessons to his sons with well-timed words of wisdom.

It is these qualities, as much as anything else, that explain *LITB*’s enduring appeal. Billingsley remarked



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later in life how surprised she was that people would still write and tell her that they watch the show with their children and grandchildren. But it's no surprise. The show is well-written; Beaver possessed the commodity of cute in copious amounts; he and his brother had genuine chemistry; Haskell was America's favorite rascal; Billingsley and Beaumont were parents to die for; and, of course, there is the nostalgia factor. Yet all that would mean nothing if *LITB* were not virtue television. You don't have to worry about the show molesting your children's minds. You can watch it and retreat into a simpler, more wholesome time — into the America we left behind.

And some would say an America that never existed. One of these people is Stephen Talbot, who played tow-headed troublemaker Gilbert Bates on the show. Talbot's character was one who would seduce the gullible Beaver into committing some childish transgression and then sometimes leave his friend holding the bag. And, ironically, it seems Talbot is a troublemaker off-screen as well. He went on to become a long-haired leftist who protested the arrest of Black Panther Bobby Seale in 1970 and today is a short-haired leftist who protests against his old show.

Ashamed and self-conscious about his association with a series that, as Talbot put it, has "obvious white-bread limitations," he took pains in [this](#) Salon piece to let the world know he's far too enlightened to share the unqualified affection for *LITB* of many of his fellow baby-boomers. He attributes the show's popularity partially to boomers being "a narcissistic, self-referential, TV generation," calls Ward's fatherly counsel "paternal homilies" and mentions the "rigid sex roles of the '50s." (I suppose we're better off today, with boys who want to attend school as girls and use the girls' bathroom.)

Talbot also says that *LITB*'s image of suburban prosperity "wasn't reality." But while this view is now common, it's also a silly criticism. Of course it's not reality — it's a television show. But is it any less realistic than today's politically-correct fare, with its masculinized portrayals of women and leftist themes? Or, is so-called "reality television" — in which the "real" people act for the cameras — somehow preferable?

In fact, *LITB* is certainly preferable to America's new reality, one in which, as Talbot says himself, parents raise children "in a less secure, divorce-prone, sometimes violent world." Of course, this is an admission that there was an old reality. It was a time when the family was intact, the out-of-wedlock birthrate was low, and the biggest problems in school were chewing gum and running in the hallways. And, given that this is largely what *LITB* reflected, how unrealistic was it, really? (Also ask yourself, is there any connection between today's moral decay and a world view that rejects virtue?)

More significantly, though, artists who lament the "unreality" of virtue television not only know little about reality, they know even less about art. They remind me of those hip-hop-glop apologists who will defend rap music by saying, "They [rappers] are just telling you what's going on out there" (yippee! It's realistic!). But this is hardly an excuse for peddling cultural poison. Something whose overriding purpose is to tell you "what's going on out there" isn't called art but something else.

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Yet art's sole purpose isn't merely to entertain, either. After all, this exclusive goal would justify everything from pornography to snuff films to the Roman arena. The truth is that the highest purpose of art is to uplift, a quality that in modern times is known as the possession of "redeeming social value." And is this disputable? Of what good is art if it titillates but degrades? So many people miss the point: It is not that America completely measured up to *LITB*'s yardstick of virtue. It is that, once upon a time, America knew that such yardsticks were worth striving for.



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Recently I watched a most beautiful example of virtue television, the 1937 film *Captains Courageous*. It's a story about love and redemption, and it touches me deeply. And it underlines the power of art. Such works, by modeling virtue and showcasing its beauty, can make us want that beauty ourselves. Just as you now see saggy-bottomed rural teens dressed as gang bangers owing to rap's influence, art can uplift us, too.

And we could use a lift today. However close we were to *Leave it to Beaver* in the 1950s, what is for sure is that such an America no longer exists in 2010. So here's praying that Barbara Billingsley may rest in peace — and that the land she helped portray may rise again.



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