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Shattered Symbols

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We are inundated with this stuff on T.V., cinema, books and even commercials. The other night it happened again. My first reaction was to think, "God! What if the children are watching this?" I checked and they weren't. So what was so violent, so nasty that my first reaction was to fear for my children? The answer is the mobster, Italian mob, MAFIA, genre of "entertainment". I fear it, because it takes all the images that my children have of their Italian American heritage and vilifies and corrupts them. Yes, I find this particularly offensive, but it goes way beyond offensive when Italian Americans are shattered through images. After watching a portion of this particular made for T.V. drama, I felt like someone had pulled a garbage truck up and dumped its contents on my head. This type of negative stereotype is destructive.

It is a powerful tool that is used to recreate who we are. The stereotype provides a false image of Italian Americans and, perhaps even more devastating, *for* Italian Americans.

The symbols we hold dearest are also the ones that are constantly used to shatter us. As Italian Americans, family has a particular importance to us. We are taught to believe in family goodness and the permanence of those familial bonds. But in the films "family" is usually reserved to mean the other gangsters in one's criminal group. We see that in the *Godfather* film a good son waits until his mother dies to have his eldest brother murdered. The films are all so heavily and purposefully laden with our Italian American symbols that they could not possibly pack a more fatal blow to all that I and many other Italian Americans have learned and taught our children to associate as their Italian American heritage. The gangsters, whose features could not be more stereotypically Italian, have Italian names, are dressed in Armani suits and Italian silk ties as they sip espresso out of red, white and green demitasse cups in front of an Italian flag with Caruso singing opera in the background. The next line is "Oh! Luigi wrap up the cannoli the FBI are here." Give me a break!

The symbols keep flying out in every scene. These films have Italian images so thick they should be the envy of all the pasta sauce ads. There is the mobster who crosses himself before he pulls the trigger to murder his brother in law. The mobster who raises his wine glass to toast his god-daughter's first communion as he is having her father killed. The mobster who goes and pays his respects to the widow of his best friend who he just had killed. The faces, the names, the food, the wine, the religion, the music, the language...every symbol screams out to the audience "THESE FOLKS ARE ITALIAN!" The symbols are unmistakable, just so that the audience can make no mistake. "THESE PEOPLE ARE CRIMINALS. THEY ARE ITALIAN... YOU CAN'T TRUST THESE PEOPLE."

I am not a criminal! My Italian family has no gangsters, no mafia. My brothers are not mobsters! My sisters are not sluts! Why am I forced to defend myself and my family? When people hear my oldest son's name they sometimes say, "Oh! *Vincenzo*, that's a mafia name." People actually ask me if I have connections to organized crime. Where do they get these stereotypes, if not directly from this genre of film? I know that America is the country of free speech and artistic self expression. But how can we allow a film genre that systematically destroys all the symbols and images that a group hold dear? Doesn't it follow that the people themselves will be destroyed? Haven't we seen what happens to so many Italian Americans seeking public office. They are destroyed not by actual wrongdoing, but by allegations and a last name that ends in a vowel. I would think that Italian Americans would not want anything to do with the images that reflect so negatively against them. Some might even change the names that associate them to their ethnic group. So they are shamed, but have done nothing shameful.

Why is there no balance, no other side? Where are the images of honest, hardworking, successful Italian Americans? I can recall only *Moonstruck* as a popular film about an Italian American family that had no mob connections. If the vast majority of the Italian Americans depicted in media were upstanding, decent people I could easily accept a few represented as criminals. But it seems that *all* the media interest in us is as criminals. This is an absolutely false view, because statistics show that Italian Americans have one of the lowest criminality rates in the United States.

Where do we go from here? We educate ourselves and our children. We tell our own story and not allow the Hollywood producer to tell it for us. We refuse the false images. And I, for one, will continue to embrace the true images of my childhood, the faces, the names, the food, the wine, the religion, the music, the language, and to pass it on to my children as their cultural heritage. I will protest its corruption and tell my own story whenever I can. I am an Italian American... these symbols belong to *me* and they are not for sale!