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The Irony of Grace: When Hollywood Mourn

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NCR Today

It's been a hard week for Hollywood. Three show business icons finished their earthly journeys. First Ed McMahon, Johnny Carson's long-time side kick, passed away. Then on Thursday, June 25, both Farrah Fawcett and Michael Jackson died.

I don't know much about Ed McMahon except that my grandmother, who could have been Ed's mother, was in love with him. Back in the 60's, when she wasn't gushing over daytime television's Betty White and Alan Ludden's *Password* romance, she had her eye on Ed McMahon. My memories of him are mostly associated to McMahon's Furniture Store in Lemon Grove, CA. There was no relation, I'm sure, but I think my grandmother liked to shop there for patio chairs hoping there was. Later, when I started getting interminable Publishers' Clearing House mailings, I began hoping McMahon would get a new job. I never did watch *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson, but whenever scenes of Johnny and Ed have replayed over the years, you know they made people laugh. They still do.

Ed McMahon was a Catholic who attended Boston College, Catholic University of America, and St. Paul the Apostle Parish in Los Angeles. Everyone knows Farrah Fawcett, even those of us who were in the novitiate when she was patrolling the earth as one of Charlie's angels. Apostolic experience, a new dimension of religious formation in those post-Vatican II years, had us out and about and that famous poster was everywhere.

The last time she got my attention was for her strong performance in the 1997 film *The Apostle*. She played the wife of a morally conflicted preacher, Sonny, (also played by writer/director Robert Duvall) who could not escape God. Sonny chased God as much as God chased him.

Since her cancer diagnosis three years ago, Farrah fought to live. Of course, she could afford to pursue

treatment in the U.S. and in Germany, something most of us would not be able to do. But the documentary she made about her determination to live as long as she could, inspired me. I had not known she was a Catholic; to see her praying the rosary and making the sign of the cross seemed to say, "I want to live and I want a miracle but I want you with me no matter what." I think she died with grace.

The most shocking death of the week was, of course, that of Michael Jackson. It was a shock when the King of Pop died like when Princess Diana was killed in the car accident in Paris in 1997. So unexpected. True, Michael had not looked healthy for years, but everyone knew he was getting to re-launch his career. He was a part of our lives for so long. He united people across the racial and musical genre divide like no one else. He thrilled us. My favorite song and music video, however, remains his 1991 **Heal the World**. I watched it on the Internet yesterday and it made me cry.

I don't know which religion Jackson was following toward the end of his life, but it is said that the song he is most proud of creating was Heal the World. (**Lyrics Here**). It is a perfect, prayerful blend of melody and lyrics that allude to the meaning of Christ's dying for us so that we might live. So that grace might sustain us enough to resolve differences in peace, so that the needless dying would stop. "Heal the world, make it a better place, for you and for me and the entire human race."

Ed McMahon was a loyal alumnus of Catholic University who was married three times. Farrah Fawcett prayed the rosary and received the blessing of the sick before dying; she had relationship issues as well. Michael Jackson's weird life is being turned inside out as I write this.

My sister Libby, a hospice nurse, says that she believes that people do not die until they have nothing left to learn. If this is true, then I wonder what Ed, Farrah, and Michael learned?

There are two things in Elizabeth Gilbert's 2006 bestseller *Eat, Love, Pray* that inspire me still. When Elizabeth was slumming through Rome's ice cream shops for four months of her year-long search for God and self, her sister Catherine visited her. She told Elizabeth about a neighbor, who with along with her young son, had been diagnosed with cancer. Elizabeth said, "Dear God, that family needs grace." And Liz's sister replied, "That family needs casseroles." Then Elizabeth writes, "I do not know if my sister fully recognizes that this is grace."

I believe Gilbert was in India when she began to reflect on death and God. She came to understand that when we die God is with us; God does not abandon us on this final journey, at the moment when we need God the most. God loves us and will not leave us.

I think there is an irony to grace. We tried to fill milk bottles with it in the Baltimore Catechism. We grant it and deny it, gain it and lose it, as if it were ours to control. But grace is God's gift, God's love, God's forgiveness, God's life lessons, and casseroles when we are sick and lonely. Grace can show up in laughter, it can reveal itself in the will to live and the surrender to death when it is one's time to go. And grace can touch us to the depths of our being through music.

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Grace is completely incongruous and it is everywhere. Even in Hollywood.

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