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Bubbles

by Joe Ferullo

Since his unexpected death late last week, a lot (probably too much) has been written about Michael Jackson -- much of it focusing on "the bubble" in which he lived his life: sealed off from real human experience in a world of his own, a world where any number of unusual things were deemed quite normal.

There has been much wringing of media hands about this bubble, and society's role in shaping and maintaining it for the troubled singer and pop culture phenomenon. Are we to blame, commentators ask, for Jackson's early demise?

The question is worth asking, if it compels us to re-examine our cultural obsessions and the damage they can do. But a bigger point may have gotten lost: we all live in our own bubbles. Michael Jackson's was just much more public.

Acquaintances on Wall Street lived in a now-burst bubble of multi-million dollar bonuses, trophy wives and extravagant homes in Connecticut or on the Long Island shore. I work in television, within a bubble of make-or-break comedies, dramas, reality shows and the rest -- as if the nation would crumble were it not sufficiently entertained. Executives forego family vacations, miss birthdays and graduations, to tend to all this stuff.

Of course, that's not how it should be, especially if you follow a faith that tells you to love your enemies, turn the other cheek, and "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Which all seem like good instructions for breaking out of bubbles.

A few years ago, I produced a network interview with Janet Jackson, Michael's younger sister, a very successful singer in her own right who was often considered by reporters "the normal one" from the Jackson clan. In the interview (and many times since), she was a fierce defender of her brother -- in fact, she appeared on behalf of the Jackson family to pay tribute to her brother this weekend at the BET

Awards in Hollywood. But she approached her own life much differently.

When we sat down to talk to her, Janet was not surrounded by a thick entourage of hangers-on. Her manager and her tour producer were both calm and decent people -- each with a healthy skepticism about fame and the music business. After the cameras began rolling, she spoke openly about the hard work she'd done to uncover how life under a microscope had molded her; she made it a priority to develop friendships off-stage and away from the limelight.

At one point, she confessed that her problems would seem small and unimportant to many people who struggled each day to simply get by. "But these are my issues, and I just needed to deal with them," she said.

This was a person, it seemed to me, striving to live outside the bubble, to live in the real world of others -- as much as anybody can. Success and fame make that much tougher, but her effort felt real and sincere.

Her brother was different. For many reasons -- most honestly not of his own making -- the effort required was simply too much.

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