

American Idols

Jamie Manson | Jul. 2, 2009

America's obsessive relationship with celebrities hit a fever pitch this past week with the death of Michael Jackson.

The NBC and ABC networks cancelled their evening programming to offer impromptu "remembering Michael Jackson" retrospectives. On news radio, nothing else seemed to be happening with the exception of the requisite traffic and weather notifications. It even made the cover of *The New York Times*, and NPR had it as one of their top stories.



Outside of the Apollo Theatre in Harlem, a church-like atmosphere was

spontaneously generated. Candles, iconic images, and prayerful messages covered the sidewalks. Mourners gathered in collective worship, singing, dancing, and praising as if they were attending a religious revival meeting. Newly minted T-shirts boasting "Long Live the King" were printed and snatched up within hours of the news.

A group of teenagers from a church in North Carolina who were engaged in a service project at our homeless outreach program took a break to try to get into the Tuesday memorial service at the Apollo. Although most of them were born no earlier than 1993 and couldn't name a Jackson song a week ago, they were crushed to find that a line stretching ten city blocks prevented them from entering the theater. But they couldn't resist being caught up in the hysteria.

Jackson's artistic force and his innovative genius were thrilling examples of the extraordinary power of human creation to lift human beings up through music and dance. And, yet, this massive, communal mourning seems empty at its core. Up until June 25, Jackson was a punch line for many comedians and entertainment publications. His contributions to popular culture seemed long forgotten. The scandals of his life and bizarreness of his lifestyle were at the forefront of our memories. He lived as a recluse in Dubai for years after his trial and no one seemed to miss him.

We did not really know him, yet we get emotionally charged over his death. Would another person tried for molesting children, whose death appears to be a result of a massive addiction to opiates, cause us such heartache? I wonder how authentic our grief is, and how much of it is another, celebrity-induced emotional fad.

A few decades ago, the novelist Walker Percy was asked in an interview to define religion. Drawing on the word's Latin root *religare*, which means literally "to bind fast," Percy defined religion as a radical bond between a person and reality that confers meaning to his or her life.

Celebrity culture, it seems to me, has become our religion. It is unreality posing as reality. It devours our attention and shapes our values and concerns. It has a unique power to move us and propel us toward action. Sometimes it even helps mold our consciences. We donate to a cause if "American Idol" has decided to "give back" to it. We become interested in Darfur because George Clooney insists on it. When Oprah made a documentary about building a girls' school in South Africa, millions were moved by her generosity. And who has been a greater promoter of Kabbalah spirituality in its centuries-old history than Madonna?

As much as I appreciate celebrities who use their enormous power for the good, I cannot help but be troubled by their capacity to dominate our minds and hearts. They lift us up in frenzy of concern that seems to fade as quickly as it erupted. Celebrity culture is fickle and faddish, and very often the social awareness the celebrities promote suffers the same fate. Remember Jackson's "We Are the World/ USA for Africa" project that set out to end famine in Ethiopia? He received an extraordinary amount of celebrity support and a mega-hit was born from it. Sadly, 25 years later, the situation remains the same in that region of the world.

So, for this week at least, Jackson is the object of worship and veneration in our cult of the celebrity. The heightened sense of loss suggests that we are so hungry for meaning, for some sense of the sacred, that the moonwalk and an epic music video are being spoken about as if they are sacraments.

But what I believe fuels our obsession with celebrities most is not their artistic or philanthropic contributions -- or even their scandals -- but their fame which serves as a symbol of our own deep desire to be known. Our preoccupation with them is in many ways a mark of our own yearning to be well-known. As communities decline and the act of socializing becomes more isolated by communication devices and social networking sites, we become less and less present to one another. This is why, I believe, sites like Twitter are so popular. We are so anxious to be recognized, that we feel the need to tell our every move to anyone willing to read about it. Unfortunately, this does not create the quality of presence that feeds the spirit and leads us into more intimate levels of knowing and being known.

Our country's preoccupation with Jackson's death this week illuminated for me the role of celebrities in our society: they are cultural golden calves that distract us from being present to one another and from recognizing the sacred working in our midst. Our cultish attachment to celebrities reveals the pathos of our culture. In our obsession with them, we are at once crying out for attention and being distracted from those realities that are most in need of our authentic presence. At its core, it suggests that we are hungry for meaning that no other cultural entity seems to be willing or able to make for us. We are starving for presence and looking towards American idols to offer us a fantasy of being known and a diversion from the challenge to know more deeply.

Jamie Manson received her master of divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology, personal commitments and sexual ethics with Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley. She is the former editor in chief of the Yale magazine Reflections, and currently serves as director of Social Justice Ministries at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church, working primarily with New York City's homeless and poor populations. She is a member of the national board of the Women's Ordination Conference.

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