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That voice: Remembering Whitney Houston

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Feb. 14, 2012 NCR Today

Of all the news coverage and reflections on the sudden death of singer/actress Whitney Houston (1963-2012), I was moved when the host of the 54th Grammy Awards, LL Cool J, said "The only thing that feels right is to begin with a prayer ? for our fallen sister, Whitney Houston."

The prayer is simple, but I was watching the audience. From what I could see, everyone in camera range bowed their heads in prayer. Sunday, the Grammys represented a community in grief for a woman whose voice was the soundtrack for a generation.

The Grammys, of all of the award shows, is perhaps the most religious. How many artists thank God for the gift of their music that garnered them accolades for their work? Whitney Houston herself won six Grammys in her short lifetime.

Just last week I was having dinner with some publishing colleagues, and the conversation moved from movies to music. Who is the best female vocalist of all time? I said, "Whitney Houston." My friends conceded that she is, perhaps, the greatest of our generation, but I think she's an all-time great because her voice will resound through the universe, care of iTunes, for decades to come.

The coroner completed the autopsy on Ms. Houston on Monday and released the body for burial. Whitney was a known abuser of alcohol and drugs, but things had been looking better for her. I hope they won't find evidence of alcohol or drugs in the toxicology report. Maybe she fell asleep and drowned.

But as one celebrity after another hits bottom and leaves this world too soon, what can we learn from this and the mangle that is the entertainment industry? Fast money, unscrupulous managers, agents and "friends"? Who or what could have made the difference in Whitney's life? She began with so much promise, but the more famous you get, the more people want a piece of you.

Perhaps we need to go back to the Barry Gordy's Motown model that was almost like a school to train musical artists in etiquette and life management. But even this was not good enough for Michael Jackson in the end.

What about adding a robust spiritual life to the training of celebrities when there is the opportunity? True, singer Katy Perry's parents are both ministers, and her marriage lasted for the blink of an eye [1]. So then, what is the rush? What is the answer?

Many artists get their start in their churches, synagogues or places of worship (others with the secular world of Disney kids). So why does the fast lane take them so far from their roots?

It would be easy to blame it all on the temptations of the world of glamor they gain entry to when they make it big. But what happens to their family formation, the good things they learned from teachers and their churches? The family that wants to stay close to them all of a sudden find themselves back at the ranch.

It comes down to choices, to saying no when instant gratification, the banner of our culture, is calling to them over an early night and rest. It comes down to character, to the support of family and choosing family first, to self-discipline.

But when you're young, the entertainment world is your oyster and you have all the time in the world, why not do something risky? It won't happen to me, right? Wrong. Dead wrong.

Because there are consequences to every choice that we make.

This is a lesson each person must learn for him- or herself.

What does a young recording star's brain look like on music? Is the frontal lobe, where consequences are considered, impaired, development stopped in its tracks? Or is the proverbial elephant in the recording studio just plain greed, choosing profit over guiding a new star just emerging?

Yes, I was moved by LL Cool J's prayer; I was moved that he prayed and that so many joined him. But will it make any difference to musical artists or celebrities when it comes time for difficult choices?

We are so good at praying after the fact.

Whitney, may you rest in peace. We will always love you. Intercede to God for all those on the path to fame and riches, that they may have the strength to make different choices than you, or Michael, or Lindsey did or have -- and live. And pray that everyone associated with an artist's life and career may have the integrity and strength to choose life, for themselves first of all, so that they can mentor young or new artists on the path to life.

It would be unfair to generalize the meat-grinder effect of the music or entertainment industry, but how many more amazing artists have to die? When is enough enough?

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