Livin' for the Applause-plause

Submitted by admin on Mon, 02/24/2014 - 14:58

In the aftermath of the Bieberpocalypse (or at least the significant meltdown of his cooling tower #2), I was thinking about why some celebs go off the rails, diving into self-destructive behavior like lemmings (note to Canadians: I know that lemmings don't actually do that, but it's a metaphor, OK?). I don't think it's just that celebs are stupid, though some undoubtedly are. I think it has to do with the structure of celebrity as a cultural construct. It's got some lethal ingredients mixed in there. Goofy things happen when people thing you are a god.

In his classic essay "Elvis Alive?: The Ideology of American Consumerism," anthropologist Peter Stromberg analyzes America's consumer culture as a type of religion. Celebs play the role of those granted immortality, those who dwell in paradise:

Celebrities are deities because they are the most significant mediators in American consumerism; like the Christian deity Jesus Christ they are at once human and God. They are the ones who participate in two worlds, the world we all live in and the world we all aspire to. Although they started out as mortals like you and me, they live their current lives in our idea of heaven, the world that is depicted in advertisements, where people are happy, beautiful, witty, satisfied,adventurous, friendly, and so on. We are all the more convinced that heaven is real, and that it can be reached, by the existence of celebrities who live in the world of fabulous beauty, wealth and fame.

And how we relish when the stars fall! We love them not just because they are divine, but because they can be brought crashing down to earth. It reminds us that, though they have more (talent, riches, lovers), they aren't really better than us. Who do they think they are?

Indeed, that's the lynchpin right there. Who do they think they are? What does it do to a person when you are surrounded by people telling you that you are the greatest thing since sliced bread and that you really need to produce that next incredible thing, or else you'll fade from stardom, be transported from heaven back to the banal world of the non-celebs. I have no idea what that must do to a person.

Well, maybe I do...a little. Back in 2008, I participated in a big Christian leadership conference in Europe. One of the keynote speakers had canceled due to a family crisis. The organizer asked if I'd be willing to pinch hit for him. So I delivered a talk to 800-some people on popular culture as an essential part of apologetics. People really liked it. And then I noticed that strangers in the hotel hallway would smile as I passed. Strangers came up to me and asked me to speak to a Christian group in their country. People noticed me. It was weird, and it scared the heck out of me...because I liked it soooooo much.

See, here's the dirty little secret about creative types: it's not that they have inflated egos, but that their egos are so very, very unstable. If you spend all your time trying to churn out something great, something you put your heart and soul into, then your very identity rides on how it is received. Your existence in the world becomes a continual roller-coaster ride. And half the time, you can't believe your own press agent, because you know you could have done better. You should be better. Unless you are anchored in something else, something or someone other than you, there is no choice but to

take Lady Gaga's song quite literally. You live for the applause.

I was watching an interview with the cast of Scott Pilgrim vs. the World (great movie, by the way; Edgar Wright is a heck of a director). The interviewer began reading questions he'd received via email. One person asked Jason Schwartzman how he handled being so awesome. Schwartzman first joked about how one should be on a first name basis with your personal cook, just to keep grounded, and so on. But then he turned serious and said, "I really don't feel that good. I have really low self-esteem. So, it's a strange question." The interviewer said, "It's not how it comes across on screen to the masses, clearly. You're crippled inside, but that's not translating." Schwartzman replied, tongue-in-cheek, "Well, the tears of a clown." It was said in jest, but you got the feeling that he was being honest. And I don't he's atypical. A performer or artist's existence is validated by the next project he or she is involved in. If ever there was a prescription for burnout, for foolishness, this is it.

Now it's easy, too easy, to point and stare and shake our heads at the ultra-rich and famous. They are easy targets. But isn't their affliction ours as well? Aren't we in the West performance-driven types? This is especially true in evangelical circles. We have a mission, a goal, and if we're not producing "fruit" (whether that's measured in converts, personal holiness, cultural change, or whatever), then we're not really worth the space that we occupy and the air that we breathe. Quite apart from our evangelical culture of celebrity, we are a driven people, a people with fragile egos because it's always riding on how we perform, how much we accomplish.

But this is a massive exercise in missing the main point of the gospel. It's not about our performance. It's about Christ's performance in my place. It's not about linking my ego to what I do, but linking my ego to what Christ has done for me. And that doesn't change, doesn't fade away. Because of the cross and resurrection and Christ's continual intercession for me, I am accepted. I don't need the applause-plause of the world. Rather, I need to respond in applause for the one who gave himself for me and loved me so well. In a sense, my whole life should be applause directed at God. That's the only real way to wean ourselves from the addiction of approval and applause from the world. High or low self-esteem, it doesn't matter in the end. What matters is God's esteem of me, and he esteems me as his beloved child. He esteems me like Christ because Christ put himself in my place. Concern for ego is enveloped in love, and I am set free to love others the Jesus loved me. Don't hate on celebrities. Learn from them and pray for them. For in their follies, we see a magnified image of our own souls.

Source URL (retrieved on *11/13/2026 - 11:41*):
http://www.turnau.cz/content/livin-applause-plause