

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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When fame becomes too big—too much. Today is the observance of the Michael Jackson Memorial in Los Angeles, CA. Not just here in the United States, but around the planet, millions and millions of people are dialed in—taking in the performance tributes and listening to the expressions of praise and adulation.

Of course, as is often the case with celebrities of Jackson’s stature, there is more to the story. The *more* is the dark side—the truncated childhood, the distorted physical countenance, recent allegations of bizarre behavior; and by many accounts, a wrenching and beleaguered loneliness.

Apart from the musical genius, the countless awards and the obscene wealth that surrounded him, the thought that won’t leave my head is the unceasing loneliness. It would seem to be so contradictory. How could someone with so much of everything be lost in such an isolated and lonely place?

Some anonymous source recalled how Jackson would from time to time go out of his compound in the wee hours of the night/morning just to talk to someone—anyone—unbothered by the usual throngs that besiege him during normal hours of the day.

The July 13th issue of TIME Magazine had a brief article, *Obama’s Sanctuary*, recounting how the popular President has taken up Sunday worship at the small, rustic chapel at his Camp David retreat—in part because of his concern about *the disruptive nature of his presence* at churches in the Washington area.

What is it about celebrities and American culture? Why do we do to them what we do? In recent times in our culture, we seem to take voyeurism to a whole new level. Are we *that* bored? Or is our celebrity hysteria more an admission that our own lives are somehow empty of real meaning and purpose?

The debasing of fame. When I recall the days of my youth, fame had a totally different meaning from what it seems to imply today. To be famous didn’t mean you were necessarily over-the-top rich and needed to hire a body guard to navigate through your daily/weekly life. Of course there were exceptions (Elvis and the Beatles come to mind).

In trying to get our brains around this, one of the notable changes in American life/culture in recent decades has been the rising disparity in income. Today, people at the top—CEO’s, sports stars, entertainers, business entrepreneurs etc.—make so much money, to the point where they can literally *buy* their life style. They simply pay an entourage of aides and assistants to provide a whole range of services.

These days, the upper echelon athlete retains a personal *just about everything*: trainer, cook, nutritionist, body guard, financial adviser and on and on. The average *Joe* or *Jane*

in the general public sees this, is impressed and wants to emulate. But shouldn't we take pause and ask ourselves, why?

Is it that we love the illusion of being totally free and independent, as if this were somehow the ultimate symbol of *making it* in life? According to this reasoning, we've *made it* when we are accountable to no one save ourselves.

But think about it! What kind of a life is that? It is certainly not relational; which means, at best, there's only a blunted sense of joy and happiness in the unfolding. At the end of the day, our lives are always about our most loving and intense relationships.

The down side of celebrity. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves: would we really want to change places with a modern celebrity? While we might be easily persuaded by the megabucks, is it really worth it? To be unable to go to a restaurant, the mall, or the sports club without camera-toting people of all stripes making a fuss.

And God help us if we ever mess up. In our news-crazed world, where the internet has made us all instant neighbors, bad publicity and potential scandal are always only a mouse-click away.

Sometimes it's sobering to remind ourselves that celebrities are human beings like us. They simply have a lot more variables to deal with. Perhaps we can most appreciate the celebrities we are prone to adore by simply valuing ourselves more—our own lives and prospects—and allowing these famed ones the freedom and happiness of a more peaceful existence.