

Celebrity Culture Harms Teens

Celebrity Culture, 2011

"American teenagers are fixated on fame."

Emily Stimpson is a contributing editor to *Our Sunday Visitor*, a Catholic newspaper. In the following viewpoint, Stimpson argues that many American teenagers are obsessed with celebrities and becoming famous, which has negative emotional and social consequences. They do not want fame that is a byproduct of great achievements or contributions, she insists—they want it instantly, without suffering or sacrifice. As a result, Stimpson alleges that youths preoccupied with fame are out of touch with reality, spiritually empty, and unable to appreciate the value of ordinary life. She recommends that parents teach their children self-discipline, humility, and servitude to God.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. What did a survey reveal about children and celebrity culture, as described in the viewpoint?
2. According to Jake Halpern, how have school curriculums contributed to youths' obsession with fame?
3. As told by the author, how did a French teenager achieve recognition and sainthood?

Blame it on reality TV.

Blame it on the entrenched loneliness of postmodern America.

Blame it on an educational curriculum that was designed to promote self-esteem but ended up overshooting the mark.

Pick your cultural poison. The result remains the same: American teenagers are fixated on fame. More than a third of them would prefer it to beauty, intelligence or strength.

Even more problematic? Those teens aren't just dreaming about being famous: They're planning on it. Thirty-one percent of American teenagers expect they'll be famous one day.

Pipe dream or not, those expectations spell big trouble for the culture now and for years to come.

Easy Way Out

Jake Halpern, author of *Fame Junkies: The Hidden Truths Behind America's Favorite Addiction*, discovered that firsthand in 2005, when he attended a convention for aspiring child actors and models.

"I watched mothers from places like Dayton, Ohio, from the heartland of America, scream with excitement as their third-grade daughters strutted across the stage in bikinis. It felt like some weird David Lynch movie," Halpern told *Our Sunday Visitor*. "Kids mistook me for an agent and were throwing themselves at

me with wild-eyed desperation. The beggar children of Bombay weren't as fierce or as desperate as some of these kids."

After the convention, Halpern set out to discover whether the children he encountered at the convention were an anomaly. In partnership with Syracuse University, he designed and administered a survey for middle school students to test his suspicions.

The results? Young girls, by a two-to-one margin, would rather be famous than more beautiful. Those same girls, by a margin of three to one, would rather be a personal assistant to a celebrity than a U.S. senator. More than a quarter of the boys and girls surveyed said they believed fame would make them happier and more loved by their families. Most found the idea of dinner with a celebrity like Paris Hilton, Jennifer Lopez or the rapper 50 Cent more appealing than dinner with Jesus Christ.

According to author and professor of English at Providence College Anthony Esolen, the desires of the teens who want to be famous or simply to serve someone who is are rooted in normal healthy desires—the desire for praise and the desire to give one's life in the service of something (or someone) great.

Wanting to be great isn't a terribly unusual or even a terribly bad thing. But the fame for which these teenagers thirst is not the kind of fame that [English poet John] Milton called "the last infirmity of a noble mind"—the fame that comes as a byproduct of doing something great.

"They don't want to conquer Persia," explained Esolen. "They want the glitz and glamour of the mass-media spotlight, even if it's only the reflected spotlight that comes from being near someone famous."

They also want it easy, and they want it fast, with no suffering and no sacrifice. Which is why most fantasize about becoming the next Paris Hilton, not the next Bill Gates.

"The kids want fame in *American Idol* fashion, where one day you're aspiring, the next day you're discovered, and boom, the rules no longer apply to you," said Halpern. "That's a lot more attractive than spending years in your garage developing a microchip."

Spiritual Emptiness

Halpern blames teens' thirst for easy celebrity on a "perfect storm" of cultural problems and technical innovations.

On the technology side, he said, the mass media, which brings entertainment celebrities into homes, grocery stores and schools via tabloids, television and the Internet, bears much of the responsibility.

"Celebrities have become ubiquitous," Halpern explained. "We're much more aware of them than people used to be."

Cable TV and reality TV, he added, have also contributed to the problem, creating more opportunities for people to get their 15 minutes of fame and, accordingly, making the goal of becoming a celebrity seem more realistic.

On a deeper level, Catholic psychologist Dr. Joseph White believes many young people's dreams of fame are a byproduct of their inner loneliness, a loneliness that grows greater by the year as more families fall apart and fewer people have the love, attention and support that traditional family and community relationships provide.

"The average American today has exactly half as many close, deep personal relationships as the average American did 10 years ago," said White. "That's a scary statistic. Fame, and the attention that comes with it, seem like a shortcut to what's gained through deep relationships."

Data from Halpern's survey supports that theory. Teenagers who said they felt lonely some or most of the time were almost twice as likely to see fame as the answer to their problems.

The spiritual emptiness found in so many lives and homes doesn't help either.

"So much of this is rooted in the fear of not being enough," said Ralph Martin, director of the Graduate Program in the New Evangelization at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit. "People are grasping for love, for attention, for being valued, because they're missing the security that comes from knowing they are eternally loved and valued by God. They're looking for something that is only real, only satisfying when it comes from him."

Great Expectations

That desire may be at the heart of why men and women through the ages, not just now, have dreamt of fame. There is a difference, however, between dreaming of fame and expecting it. And, according to a 2005 study conducted by the *Washington Post*, the Kaiser [Family] Foundation and Harvard University, fame is exactly what 31 percent of American teenagers expect.

That may be the most troubling statistic of all. It corroborates, said Halpern, data from researchers across the country that indicates a growing tendency among American teenagers and young adults toward narcissism, an overweening vanity and self-absorption.

In fact, studies by Keith Campbell at the University of Georgia indicate that on the Narcissism Personality Index, no other demographic group in no other part of the world scores as high as the American teenager.

One culprit for that, said Halpern, may be that the self-esteem curriculums, which have dominated education since the 1970s, have worked a little too well, making people believe not just that they are unique and important, but also that they are more unique and more important than everyone else.

Halpern believes that parents who have a distorted view of what it means to give their children everything

don't help, either.

"When I went to the convention, I was expecting to find your typical pushy stage moms," he said. "And I did. But just as often, I came across parents who were completely run by their kid. When you think being a parent means being your kid's personal assistant and chauffeur, it shouldn't be a surprise when your kid ends up being self-centered."

It also shouldn't be a surprise, said White, that teenagers aspire to a form of greatness that comes a little easier than the greatness that came from defeating Napoleon, discovering penicillin or circumnavigating the globe.

"Research from Yale's Child Study Center shows that we have increasing problems with delayed gratification," he explained. "Patience and prudence are virtues we're sorely lacking. We want what we want, and we want it now. People are looking for shortcuts to greatness."

Such shortcuts, however, are costly.

"The person who achieves fame is in deep spiritual danger," Esolen said. "You run the risk of becoming a two-dimensional, cardboard figure, not a real person who is held accountable. And events conspire so that you never wake up to that reality. You never realize that you've lost something of your humanity."

In Touch with Reality

Of course, most young people dreaming about red carpets won't ever walk down one. But their dreams don't come cheap either.

According to White, posting inappropriate pictures on MySpace, broadcasting details of relationships on Facebook, and "twittering" every thought and action are just a few of the ways ordinary teens live out their desire for the spotlight. They treat their own lives like celebrity magazines treat the lives of the stars, shining the spotlight perpetually on themselves.

In that process, said White, "teens sacrifice appropriate boundaries." And the more boundaries teens sacrifice, the more they run the risk of being humiliated and exploited "by information that should have stayed private."

Unrealistic expectations of fame also have consequences that can last long after the demise of Facebook.

"Most of us are not called to be great saints, great leaders, great anything," explained Esolen. "We're just called to be ordinary people doing ordinary things—loving our children, keeping our homes in good repair, walking humbly with our God. That's the way God made us. And he made it so that there is tremendous joy to be derived from the everyday, ordinary world. The more people desire what's not ordinary—fame, celebrity, instant greatness—the less joy they'll find in life."

And the less likely it is that they'll seek after what will bring them that joy.

"To possess the virtue of humility means to be in touch with reality," said Martin. "Ultimately, sanctity is about getting in touch with reality, about understanding who God is and what the purpose of life is."

"The danger of seeking after or expecting fame is that it generates and affirms desires in us that aren't healthy or true," he concluded. "It takes us away from reality. And that reality isn't a burden. Holiness isn't a burden. It's a gift God offers us. That's the purpose for which we were created. And that is the only way we'll ever find true happiness, true joy."

Antidotes to the Fame Bug

How can parents help children set their sights on something other than Hollywood? What's a parent to do once the fame bug bites? Is there an antidote?

Our Sunday Visitor put those questions to Catholic child psychologist Dr. Joseph White and *Fame Junkies* author Jake Halpern. Here's their advice:

Turn off the television: According to the study conducted by Halpern and Syracuse University, teenagers who watch more than five hours of television a day are twice as likely as those who watch less than one hour to prefer fame over beauty, intelligence and strength. They're also twice as likely to believe their families will love them more if they become a celebrity, and much more apt to believe fame is a cure for loneliness.

Ask a different question: "We spend a lot of time asking kids, 'What do you want to do when you grow up?'" said White. "Instead, we need to ask them, 'Who is God calling you to be?'" By promoting the idea of vocation and helping children understand the greatest thing they can do is God's will, White believes parents can direct the innate desire for greatness to its proper end—holiness.

Make kids wait: The allure of Hollywood-style celebrity is rooted in its ease. Halpern described it as "winning the lottery but with more glamour." Accordingly, White advises parents to teach their children that patience, hard work and self-discipline pay off. "It's important to let kids know that we care about them and that we understand waiting is hard," White said. "But it's dangerous to give your child everything they want right when they want it."

Teach children how to make small sacrifices: Whether it's avoiding sweets on Fridays, forgoing a favorite television show or tithing [giving 10 percent to charity, usually the Church] part of their allowance, small sacrifices teach children that giving up something they want a little can help them achieve something they want a lot. According to White, helping children understand "that sometimes we have to make difficult choices to better ourselves," helps them develop the self-discipline they need to grow in holiness, as well as develop deep, lasting relationships.

Encourage children to develop talents in service to God: Whether it's a quick mind, a beautiful voice or a charming personality, all talents are gifts from God and ultimately meant to glorify him. Accordingly, White

advises parents to redirect their children's desire to use their talents for fame and glory to instead use them for God. From singing in the choir to evangelizing on a school mission trip, White said activities that nurture and direct young people's talents in that way will "help them become the person God made them to be, and find real satisfaction."

"The Last Shall Be First"

God likes doing things a bit backward ... backward, that is, from a human perspective. From his perspective, it's not backward at all—just the way things work in the kingdom of God.

Consider fame.

In the kingdom of man, the way to greatness is to pursue fame and fortune like a predator pursues its prey.

Not so in the kingdom of God. There, the first is last, the last first, the least the greatest and the greatest the least. Littleness, meekness, and poverty carry far more pull than glitz, glamour, and glitter. And the rich have loads more to worry about than the poor. Think "camels" and "eyes of needles."

To make sure the world knows that all that "first last, last first" stuff isn't just talk, God has given the Church thousands of witnesses to the contrary. Those witnesses show the world the way to true greatness, dwarfing seeming giants with sanctified littleness.

The great irony, of course, is that the saints who do that the best, tried so very hard not to. They didn't set out to be great at anything other than following God's will. They didn't plan on teaching the world a lesson. They wanted nobody but God to know their name.

Case in point? St. Anthony of Egypt.

Like many a young man in the fourth century, Anthony spent his days fasting and praying in a hut on the outskirts of his hometown. But, between his neighbors and the demons who paid him regular visits, Anthony found his living situation rather crowded. Retreating across the Nile, the ascetic climbed a mountain, then shut himself into an old fort, determined never to see the face of man again.

That worked for about 20 years. Then, the visitors started arriving. At first, Anthony ignored them, letting their knocks on his door go unanswered. As the knocks grew more persistent, however, Anthony realized he would never get any peace unless he responded to their pleas for guidance in the ascetical life. He emerged from his fort, spent the next five years establishing a colony of monks, then headed off once more into the desert. For the last 45 years of his life, he divided his time between solitude and attending to the pilgrims who relentlessly sought him out.

St. Anthony fruitlessly sought anonymity in the desert. St. Benedict Joseph Labre sought it just as fruitlessly in the city.

The 18th-century French saint journeyed about Europe on foot, seeking to no avail admission to various monasteries and seminaries. Realizing that God was calling him to something else, the young and handsome Benedict became a beggar, wandering from shrine to shrine across western Europe. He finally settled in Rome in 1774. Dressed in rags and sleeping in the streets, he spent most of his days and nights praying before the Eucharist in the churches of the Eternal City.

Growing closer and closer to God, Benedict began manifesting great signs of holiness—levitating, bilocating and even multiplying loaves of bread. Bishops, priests, laymen and laywomen sought him out. Benedict would attend to them, then retreat into obscurity once more. After he died, in the backroom of a butcher shop, all of Rome and half of Italy turned out for his funeral, with the military called in to preserve order.

A century later, a French teenager entered the Carmelite cloister from which she would never emerge. She lived there for less than 10 years, dead at the age of 24 from tuberculosis. The little girl did nothing that the world counts as important. She founded no religious orders, opened no hospitals or schools, traveled to no foreign lands as a missionary. She penned no books for public consumption (although a journal she kept was published posthumously), received no visitors, met with no bishops or princes of the Church. She lived a quiet life filled with prayer, work and the daily offering of suffering. But after Thérèse of Lisieux died, not only was she canonized, but she was also declared a Doctor of the Church and "the greatest saint of modern times."

The man who only wanted to be left alone with God became the Father of Monasticism. The beggar who wanted to spend his days in prayer had his grave visited by tens of thousands of men and women from across Europe. The little girl who wanted to live hidden from the world showed the world the "little way" to God. Those are the types of men and women who fill the kingdom of God—men and women who sought the hidden life, who shunned greatness, and who longed for God's will.

They are men and women who give eternal witness to God's seemingly backward ways.

The Dark Side of Celebrity Obsession

It's one thing for teenagers to dream about fame, but what about the grown-ups? Are they entertaining fantasies of stardom as well?

The answer is no ... and yes.

Unlike 16-year-olds, most adults know Hollywood won't be calling anytime soon. That doesn't mean, however, that they're any less preoccupied with glitz and glamour than the young ones are. As a culture, Americans are celebrity obsessed.

More than 3.5 million Americans subscribe to *People* magazine. And 1.9 million subscribe to its closest competitor, *US* magazine. Millions more track the ups and downs of their favorite celebrities on top network programs such as *Entertainment Tonight* and *Access Hollywood*, while others tune into the two E!

networks on cable—one devoted to what celebrities do, another devoted to what celebrities wear—or log onto the three E! Web sites. There are also hundreds of other fan magazines, Web sites and blog sites—some professional, some very unprofessional—that fill people's seemingly insatiable appetites for news about Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie and Jen Aniston.

Celebrity "News"

That appetite is, in fact, so big that the network and cable news programs have gotten in the game, regularly devoting more airtime to news about the stars than news about anything else.

In *Fame Junkies*, author Jake Halpern recounts that on Jan. 7, 2005—the day news broke about Aniston and Pitt's divorce—CNN devoted more total coverage to the Aniston/Pitt brouhaha than it did to five other major stories of the day combined—stories about an AIDS research breakthrough, a major White House decision, the Oil for Food scandal, Social Security reform, and espionage in the FBI.

Halpern told *Our Sunday Visitor* that two years later, on a day he was scheduled to talk about the book on CNN, his appearance was cancelled because of breaking news.

The news?

Britney Spears lost custody of her children.

Halpern later went back and did a word count of the news coverage that day. During a 24-hour period, the network devoted almost three times the amount of coverage to the Spears' story as it did to the war in Iraq, and 37 times more coverage to Spears than to the unfolding conflict in Darfur.

"Our obsession with celebrities is distorting our perspective about what's important," said Halpern. "There's a limited amount of space, and celebrity stories push out stories that we could and really should be paying attention to. That's a huge problem."

Losing Perspective

Providence College English professor Dr. Anthony Esolen sees that problem and the obsession causing it as a sign of the spiritual emptiness of contemporary culture, or as Pope Benedict XVI often refers to it, "the anti-culture."

"There's something deeply antithetical to culture itself in this obsession," Esolen explained. "There's a pettiness, a smallness that works against building true culture, which is about heritage, traditions received and devotion to a way of life."

"The more people seek to be fed by mass idols," he continued, "the more they become incapable of appreciating ordinary culture, of making it, remembering it, loving it. We end up becoming fools of the mass market."

And like all those young people obsessed with becoming famous, Esolen added, those simply obsessed with the famous also end up losing their perspective on reality.

"Teenage girls who spend all their time looking at supermodels can no longer appreciate their own beauty, the beauty of an ordinary human body," Esolen said. "Men are infected in the same way. If a celebrity's life becomes your ideal of what a human life should look like, you'll never appreciate the greatness of the human lives around you, including your own."

Further Readings

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