

Fame and Fortune September 23, 2007

I didn't even know who Anna Nicole Smith was until she died, but then, how could any of us have missed at least being able to recognize her picture when it flashed on the evening news? If she wasn't a celebrity before she died, she certainly was afterwards, as we heard saga after saga of her life with all its sordid details.

At about the same time all that was happening, we were also hearing about the adventures of Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan, and who was breaking up with whom in Hollywood, along with news about the newest babies and most recent love affairs. It almost seems as if the news has gone into the tabloid business, specializing in all the goings-on of the latest celebrities.

Now this summer, one of the big occurrences is the audition for the next *American Idol* season. If I remember correctly, there are six or seven different cities hosting the tryouts, and one of them is Philadelphia. I read that nearly 20,000 people showed up to audition, each one hoping to go from being an ordinary person like you and me to being someone who is rich and famous.

What is all this about, and why are we so enamored with celebrities? I certainly don't have the answers to that, but there are some who have studied this whole phenomenon who believe that they understand what it's all about.

I suppose it would be helpful to begin with some definition of what we're talking about when we use the term "celebrity." *Wikipedia* says, "**A celebrity is a widely-recognized or famous person who commands a high degree of public and media attention.**" According to Daniel Boorstin, a celebrity is "**known for being well-known.**" A professor at DePaul University says that a celebrity is the "transaction" of three elements: the raw material of the person, the fans and the mass media. To become a celebrity, apparently all it takes is a name, a face and some 3-10 so-called facts that "everyone" knows. Put all those things together, and poof! We've got a celebrity on our hands!

But why are we so fascinated with all the strange things that stars do? Of course, this sort of thing has probably been going on since there have been those we think of as famous. And there are certain professions that lend themselves to making someone a celebrity, like movie stars, television actors, high-ranking politicians, TV show hosts, supermodels, successful athletes and pop musicians. Some of the earliest celebrities were the likes of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Douglas Fairbanks, and folk humorists like Will Rogers.

Many of them became well known during the time in our history when we were going through the Great Depression. I suppose it was something to take our minds off the troubles most people were

experiencing at the time. Some "experts" think it still serves some of that purpose today, providing a diversion from the war in Iraq, or the stresses we face in daily life. It's as though we allow ourselves to live in a fantasy world, imagining that we, too, could be the one who has fame and fortune.

Recently, there has been a study of some 600 people, and it was found that 1 out of 3 was dealing with what has come to be called "Celebrity Worship Syndrome," or CWS. There are varying degrees of this syndrome, but it all has to do with an inordinate amount of captivation around someone who is rich and famous, and some psychologists believe that the entertainment media and the easy access of information are primarily responsible for what has come to be called the "monster known as the celebrity super fan."

However, something has changed a bit, or so it seems to me. Columnist Bob Greene has written an article entitled "The new stardom that doesn't require paying any dues" in which he comments that, throughout most of history, celebrities were those people of talent who worked to create something of note. That doesn't appear to be the case today, as there is the sense that having a pretty face or being an heiress to fortunes is enough to deserve this status. Greene notes that the stars of reality TV shows "**have become famous not for doing, but merely for being.**"

For sure, there is both a public and private side to each and every one of us, and sometimes the two sides are very different. I found it interesting to note the way the famed actress Marilyn Monroe talked about it. She said, "**An actress is not a machine, but they treat you like a machine. A money machine.**" So much for feeling like a real person. Apparently, Marilyn Monroe deep down inside felt that she was a product being marketed, and not really taken seriously. She also shared what I find to be a very telling comment when she said, "**First, I'm trying to prove to myself that I'm a person. Then maybe I'll convince myself that I'm an actress.**"

Frankly, that to me is a very revealing remark. I take her comment to mean that she wanted to know that she was somebody when she wasn't posing or acting in movies, and it's fairly easy to move from that thought to wondering if maybe she had any real sense of herself as a person at all. Did she know who she was? Was being a famous actress the only way she was ever "somebody?" I certainly don't know the answers to those questions, but I wonder...

To be honest, I worry some about things like that in our society, because it occurs to me that many of us believe the only way we can be "somebody" is by becoming a celebrity. If we can't accomplish that on our own, then we choose to live vicariously by worshipping the life of this famous person or that one.

That, in and of itself, points to an issue that probably all of us deal with at one time or another—

our own sense of self worth, our self-esteem. What does it take to be a somebody? Is it only if we become well known and rich and famous that we can claim to be somebody? Is it only in someone else's eyes that we qualify as somebody? What's going on?

Perhaps Gabrielle Roth was right when she wrote, **"We undervalue ourselves. The bottom line is that we don't think we deserve love. The utter lack of self-esteem is paralyzing."** It's as though we don't know who we are, nor do we value ourselves as a person; instead, we're always looking to someone else to tell us who we are, and whether or not we have worth as a human being. Sometimes we seem to think the only way that we can be validated is by becoming a celebrity, a "someone" in the eyes of our adoring public.

When we do that, I fear we're missing the point. Value, worth, identity, self-esteem—none of that comes from out there somewhere. We can't find it by becoming a celebrity, as the lives of many of today's so-called stars prove. To me, it's sad to think that we confuse the superficial world of celebrity status with real value and identity.

Well then, what's the answer? Where does a positive sense of self come from? That's where our Bible passages for today come in. One of the passages comes from Paul's writings to the people in the church in Rome. Paul writes: **"God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who God is, and we know we are: Parent and children."** It's clear from that passage that we are God's sons and daughters. What could be better than that?

Then our other passage is from the prophet Isaiah who shares God's words in the first passage. It reads like this:

**"I have called you by name—you are mine...
Because you are precious to me
And because I love you and give you honor."**

This is a powerful statement that God is making, yes, to the people of Israel, but also to you and me. How much more of a "somebody" could we be that to be loved and honored by God? This is affirmation of our value through God's desire to call us by name and to be told that we are precious to God. .

Every time I read that verse from Isaiah, I am reminded of the play *The Man of La Mancha*. You probably know the story: Don Quixote meets a woman of the streets, and sees who she really is beneath her roughness. He declares that she is his lady, and he gives her a new name. She will no longer be known as Aldonza; she is now Dulcinea. She refuses to believe him, and screams that she is only a kitchen maid—a strumpet—a nothing, and runs from the stage.

Later on, as Don Quixote is dying, the woman comes to him. Because of him, she has been saved from self-hate, and has learned about loving and valuing herself. She is truly now Dulcinea.

That's the opportunity God gives us every moment of every day. We are God's child; God has called us by name. "I love you"—those are God's words to us. Being loved and honored by God, when we really know and believe it, is all we need—all we need.

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that each of us knows that, in God's eyes, we are already "somebody" because we are God's child, loved by God, created by God, valued by God. That's true richness.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace.
Amen.