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The Fame Phenomenon

A couple of months ago, I was in New York City with several friends. In our time there, we made sure to hit the famous hot spots seen on television. As a collective group we bumped into a good number of celebrities, such as actress Courtnie Cox, rapper Snoop Dogg, fashion model Tyra Banks and some smaller actors from a fantasy show called *Auror's Tale.*

By the end of the trip, I started to realize a lot of things. First, that these celebrities were really just people, and for some reason, in our heads, we had made them much larger than life. Even the smaller actors seemed to be physically bigger in our minds, enlarged by our reverence of them, but in reality, they were simpler and more normal than any of us had anticipated. And this began to beg the question of why we, as a culture, valued fame over almost everything else? For some celebrities, the value of “talent” is an easy and immediate answer to this question, but for others, the pedestal on which we place them started to become a veritable pain to me. Because, some of the celebrities with which we idolize our lives with are either marketing products, or utterly lacking in any special attributes that could call for the degree of worship given to them by today's generation. For what reason is an actress from Real Housewives more deserving of public idolization than my local hospital doctor? Why is it we give two mounds of attention when Tiger Woods cheats on his wife with a whole lot of women when a whole lot of people have done the same exact thing?

When you break it down, fame is, in essence, a popularity contest. We as a culture yearn to be liked - a completely superfluous need, but nevertheless understandable. In our society, who wants to be hated? I don’t. Just look at the way kids can act in high school: we'll endure some pretty unpleasant things just to surround ourselves with the "cool kids." We can extend that popularity notion to the celebrity buzz. Do we preoccupy ourselves with them, and want to be close to them, because we believe our proximity to them could make us more popular?

Let's take a look at it. These days, there are simply more celebrity magazines than news magazines worldwide, each magazine trying to sell the most scandalous story so that you'll spend your hard-earned dollar on it. Through the media, celebration become the glue to our society - what would we converse about on the bus if it weren't for the relationship woes of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt? How could we continue talking to our mother-in-laws if not for gossip of Paris Hilton? We use them, simply, to feel connected.

But what is it, exactly, about celebrities that make them so irresistible? Is it truly that their glamorous lives are on a parallel universe to mine or yours? But what I noted back in New York was that the celebrities I met were none of the above, they were normal, they were me, they were you. As with the popularity factor, we like to fantasize that our lives could possibly, just potentially, become like theirs, and we could be rich, desirable, beautiful.

But let's also take note of the fact that in today's culture, almost anyone can become a star. Reality television has made it ridiculously easy for someone with no noticeable intelligence to grab a place on our packed pedestal of idolization. Take Jersey Shore for example, which, for those of you that are thankfully ignorant of, is a hugely popular MTV reality show about several New Jersey-situated Italians that run around getting drunk, sleeping with numerous people, and creating drama. Last year, a single Jersey Shore cast member known for his underwear modeling skills made five million dollars. Yes, five million dollars in one year, for getting drunk, sleeping with numerous people, and creating drama. His co-star, self-named "Snookie" probably made twice as much, but that number is almost twice as bearable, because she's the main character. Sure, she shares the same IQ as a lab rat and might represent our generation's impending doom, but as the main character, her style of getting drunk, sleeping with numerous people and creating drama might be a bit more sophisticated to watch.

*The personality of this Snookie is the guilty pleasure of our generation.* It represents everything wrong with reality TV, and even more, everything wrong with our obsession with Snookie-like personalities. It’s these kind of celebrities, that became famous for no discernable reason, that now constitute “addictive television” to us normal people. These kind of celebrities and shows can make 20 million dollars a year for their amazing ability to do ridiculous things, while the average Western educator makes around $40,000 in the same time - what does that say about our prioritization of income?

Consumption of media isn't a small matter in western culture, and it's perfectly human to desire money, fame and greatness. But there's a blind fascination when we're star-struck by the lives of someone who is as ordinary as you and I. The charm of fame has become so expansive that we are okay with every idea to which it is attached, even absurdity. Meeting so-called celebrities in person in New York decided my outlook, and no longer will be I star struck by someone simply because they carry the valueless name of fame. Perhaps we should take a closer look at whether our idols deserve their adoration, and if that favorite entertainment magazine or website of ours is really worth our time. Society shouldn't respect fame, but talent - achievement - courage. As Emily Dickinson once said, “I do not like the man who squanders life for fame; give me the man who living makes a name.”