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American Idols

I enjoy watching "American Idol," and I have not missed a single episode this season. I suspect I watch the show for the same reasons that most people do—not for the singing, which frankly is a distraction, but for the human drama: the joy, the hopes, the dreams, and, in many cases, the pain of an almost delusional belief in one's talents. "I can be anything I want to be" is a common refrain from participants.

In one typical audition, a woman, 21-years-old, blonde and attractive in a generic sort of way, informed the judges that she would sing a Céline Dion number. She smiled, cleared her throat, and began. It was obvious from the first second that she could not sing, although she had clearly spent a lot of time in front of the mirror. She looked the part of a diva, as she stared soulfully at the camera, then closed her eyes and hit an excruciatingly high note, with vibrato thrown in for good measure. She was completely out of tune, but when she stopped, she looked as proud as an operatic soprano at the end of an aria.

"How do you think you did?" Simon, the acerbic British judge, asked with a barely disguised sneer.

"Great!" she said.

"Not a single note was in tune," he said. "You cannot sing."

Later, she wiped away her tears. "I don't care what they think. I am a star."

Her mother, with her carefully coiffed hair, glared indignantly at the camera. "My daughter sang for the Mayor; those judges don't know what they're talking about!" she said angrily.

No wonder her daughter thought she was destined for instant fame and success. "You are special. You can be who you want to be," she has heard over and over again, in a well-intentioned, but misguided attempt to increase her self-esteem. Her teachers, glib talk show hosts, New Age gurus on television, self-help bestsellers, pop-psychologists—everyone has told her that success is simply a matter of believing that one is special, that nothing is beyond reach, if one truly believes in oneself.

Unfortunately, she has not been told the entire truth—that self-confidence can come only from a realistic appraisal of one's unique strengths, talents, and weaknesses. She has not learned that a sense of achievement comes from attaining realistic goals, that success does not come merely from wishful thinking and faith. So, when she does not achieve her goals, the implication is "I did not believe in myself enough."

When she fails an audition, like she did today, she believes that, instead of reappraising her talents and goals, she should instead strengthen her resolve to become a celebrity. When I see her crying on TV, it seems to me that a part of her must know that society has lied to her. When she insists, "I am a star," her voice rises—she seems anxious, perhaps coming to the slow realization that she might never be rich or famous.

But she fights this knowledge and makes herself believe in her eventual stardom more and more, until the discordance between reality and her belief seems almost delusional. She is terrified of a life of relative obscurity. And who can blame her?

Her mother, and the media, and society have made her think of life as empty, unless lived under the glare of a camera. For her, and so many like her, public adulation has become the only worthwhile source of happiness and self-worth.

Our society has become a crucible of narcissism.

At the clinic, I see a new patient. Linda is a 22-year-old college student who has been referred to me by her school counselor for the evaluation of possible depression.

"I'm fine when I'm out with my friends. You know, we're all laughing and having a good time, but if someone says something negative, it really bums me out," she says.

I've been seeing an increasing number of patients with a form of atypical depression, without the classic leaden paralysis: low mood that brightens after a positive social encounter and declines in the face of the slightest criticism. I think that the same social forces that create those overly confident contestants on "American Idol" are responsible for the growing number of patients like Linda. They are both casualties of an increasingly insular society, where some people pursue glamour and celebrity to meet their growing need for social approval, while others, like Linda, became mildly depressed, vaguely dissatisfied with their lives, their happiness contingent on the fickle nature of social approval.

On another episode, a 23-year-old man from a small town in Texas said after an appalling audition, "My life is awesome; it's like a reality TV show." He said this honestly, openly, without any trace of irony.

I wondered what he meant. Maybe he was trying to say that his life was dramatic enough to be of potential entertainment value to the general public, but I wondered: Did he live his life as if performing for some invisible camera, like an Orwellian nightmare? Either way, it was clear that he judged his life by the standards of movies and television. Happiness is when life is like a TV show.

It appears that celebrity worship is associated with poorer mental health.[1] But is there a cause-effect correlation? Does celebrity worship lead to depression or does depression lead to celebrity worship?

I found some interesting information online. A prominent ABC News columnist quotes a media observer as saying, "Gossip magazines are proliferating for the same reason that prescriptions of antidepressants and other psychotropic drugs are proliferating. They dull our emotional pain."[2]

I resent this frivolous comparison of prescription medicines to gossip mags, but I remember at least one patient who reported that she was able to cope with depression because of an interest in celebrities. "They are like my friends," she said.

She is chronically depressed, has a severe dependent personality disorder, and is acutely sensitive to perceived rejection. I think it's no coincidence that she has an interest in celebrity life. Identifying with their lives gives her a sense of meaning, and even though this meaning is trivial and fragile, it's better than the emptiness that she feels otherwise.

The gossip mags, the media, and society's preoccupation with celebrity are both the cause and effect of depression. For the "American Idol" hopefuls and for some of my patients, life seems bland in comparison to the glitz they see on television, a life that is always out of reach, despite their fervent desire for stardom.

The media perpetuate depression by distorting fundamental values, by holding up the life of glamour as the only worthwhile life. Diabolically, the media first creates the need and then offers itself up as a solution. First, the barrage of images of a glamorous and ultimately unreal life worsens the depression, and then, when the person's life seems meaningless and trivial, the media whisper cunningly, "Watch our shows, identify with the celebrity lifestyle, and you might forget your insignificance."

That ABC report had it wrong. Gossip mags are not like prescription drugs, but like drugs of abuse—decreasing pain transiently, only to make it worse.

A few days later, I notice a headline in the papers. "Junk Food—The New Tobacco," it reads, referring to recent attempts to treat the junk-food industry in the same light as the tobacco industry.

I am waiting for the day when the headline will read, "TV—The New Tobacco."

But for now, I still watch TV. I am trying to quit.

REFERENCES

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