



EXCESSIVE HERO
WORSHIP HAS WARPED
OUR PERSPECTIVES ON
REALITY AND
SELF-EXPECTATIONS.

CULT OF CELEBRITY

BY KEVIN PALMER

In a recent survey, we asked several men in three different cities who they had looked up to as boys. Who did they want to be most like as adults? All except two responded with a superstar figure from the sports or entertainment world, running the gamut from Mickey Mantle to Mick Jagger.

None of those interviewed had looming bodyguards protecting them from hordes of autograph seekers or left the premises in sleek black limousines. This raised the questions (politely unasked, of course) about why they'd set such unrealistic childhood expectations in the first place and how they were adjusting as adults.

Being a man and having ultimate respect for my gender, I'm sure most of these guys have "gotten over" not being the superhero they dreamed of and have quite nicely made their way as "the guy next door," like my neighbor John. With a wife, two kids, a job and a few cool tools in his garage, he's earned his respectable place in society. And he's earned my personal admiration as a guy I can count on in a pinch or shoot the breeze with out in the yard.

Manhood is tough enough without getting encumbered with false "supersized" childhood expectations about which superhero you're expected to become. Since the beginning of mankind, the *man* in mankind has done most of the heavy lifting. You know, killing woolly mammoths, fighting great wars and such, but he still falls behind the curve when it comes to life expectancy of the sexes.

Accomplishing our weekly responsibilities so we could relax on Sunday was once something to be proud of. Then in a blink of an eye, in an evolutionary sense, we started to lose our identity to bigger-than-life superheroes — the ante was upped, and our lives slipped into a haze of discontent.

Everywhere you looked, the media began supplying images of men doing unbelievable things that went far beyond the capabilities of mere mortal men — incredible men who were "more powerful than a locomotive and able to leap tall buildings with a single bound!" Yes, Superman! Hollywood soon refined its movie-making techniques to make unrealistic comic-book characters seem more believable than ever. The bar kept being raised and the public responded with even greater gullibility — a desire for bigger cars, larger houses, better hair, tighter abs and more sex!

Leading men (or at least movie actors) who appeared to be real men *always* got the girl, won the fight, found the treasure and, in sequel after sequel, never got tired or old. Now, most guys wonder why they don't look like Matthew McConaughey or Channing Tatum when they wake up in the morning — and why they don't have all day to spend at the gym getting buff. But it's not possible in the world of house payments, car repairs, discord at work, complications of raising children, and maybe even divorce, sickness and death.

Today, the acceptable measure of a man's worth has been reset by celebrity antics, airbrushed magazine spreads, and superficial sound bites used to sell products that celebrities pitch. Constant bombardment of these false (but seemingly realistic) images are convincing men they need to be "more." They've also convinced women to expect more from a man. This is creating what psychologists call *objectification**, which means "regarding of one's self or another person merely as an object." Ultimately, according to a study called "Self- and Partner-objectification" this

can lead to poor self-image and less emotionally fulfilling relationships, and can even result in shame and anxiety. This in turn sets up consequences such as an inability to connect with one's bodily states, something important for experiencing sexual pleasure.

True to the spirit of manhood, guys in general "man up" to satisfy these unrealistic expatiations by putting in more hours and working harder. They also consume more products and shower their families with more material things, but in doing so, they spend less time with those they love. In the meantime, the media steps up to further feed this testosterone-driven consumption with even more sensationalism.



Superhero worship has become big business in America, not only in movies and television, but also in sports and music. As the Average Joe works harder to model these unreal images, his frustration grows. Instead of focusing on strengths and values that would further his own success, he's chasing a phantom image, that he can never buy, because we can't buy something that isn't real. Meanwhile, the salaries of actors, athletes and entertainers skyrocket, driving many of them well beyond the top 1 percent of the nation's income earners.

Ironically, the amounts average consumers spend is credited for providing two-thirds of the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In effect, men have created their own nemesis in an endless cycle of paying for a superhero fantasy that can never be achieved. Consequently, sponsors of this nonreality are selling bigger and better products to compensate for perceived inadequacies that further separate men from who they really are.

Again, this results in an endless cycle of excessive consumption of material possessions mixed with a Neanderthal mindset of keeping up with the Joneses (or the McConaugheys). All this requires men to work harder and longer, removing them from the very activities that would ground them in the reality of manhood — family, friends and emotional attachment. Meanwhile, the droning backdrop is separating men from their hard-earned dollars to fund the multimillion-dollar contracts paid to superstars and the machinery that perpetuates them.

We have become a society with an ever-increasing fixation on other people's lives. This human flaw of false idol worship has been happening for a long time — you may have read about it in the Old Testament. But you'd think mankind would have evolved by now, especially when looking at the "real lives" of superstars and recognizing that anyone rarely deserves that level of admiration.

But recognize that the only reason they have that status is because we give it to them.



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During a recent lunch, my young waitress talked obsessively about seeing a rap star and his entourage at a buffet line in Las Vegas. Her constant chatter alluded to a belief that since she could see him “up close and personal,” she too had a degree of star appeal. I saw it as a “famously by association” scenario that satisfied a gaping hole in her ego. The food that day was delicious, but I could hardly stomach the sociological indigestion that came with it.

This 21st century affinity for wanting to make other people’s lives our own, or the misconception that being on the VIP list is a qualifier of our own identity is ludicrous. However, that’s exactly what media messages are designed to do — and men are buying into them.

In the Middle Ages, the equivalent of today’s top billboard performers and entertainment stars were court jesters paid minimal wages and seated far from the king’s table. Why are today’s jesters held with such reverence and paid extraordinary salaries so they can build majestic mansions and clear airport concourses to board their private planes? They are no different than the court jesters of the past — except millions of people are paying homage to them while throwing them their hard-earned dollars.

Remember this: Today’s court jesters receive their power from us and cannot survive unless we permit it. Directly or indirectly, we perpetuate their enormous egos and pay

for their ridiculous salaries. No harm done? Think again. I contend that offering this reverence becomes divisive to a man’s identity and costly to his own personal power, balance and peace.

You may not look like a movie star or be cut like a male model, but superstars don’t look perfect either when Hollywood lights aren’t highlighting their best features. When they go home, they deal with the same realities of most men — relationships, aging and careers. Often they can’t live up to their own media hype, and sometimes lives end tragically because of it.

Celebrity has gone so far that even people not acting as perfect human specimens are admired as “royalty.” Reality TV has taken star adulation to new levels (or should I say new lows?). Personalities such as Kim Kardashian and Snooki have earned millions of dollars and millions of fans without accomplishing anything of note. Reality TV has become a springboard for boorish behavior, which is rewarded, although these people are famous for being famous. The current insatiable media cycle creates stars simply through promotion and hype and not performance or achievement.

Admittedly, reality TV is evolving, maybe for better (or for worse), possibly bringing to light people who are potential role models. But even so, we should ask ourselves if they deserve such a ridiculous amount of attention.



Where can a person go these days to escape the overdose of nonreality? Even the manly bastion of sports has been comprised. Athletics was once about “getting in the game.” Increasingly, the hype around pro sports has driven more people into watching games than playing them. Granted, seeing those who excel at a sporting skill is exciting, but an increasing majority of younger men prefer “virtual” over “actual” participation.

Admittedly, there can be a time and place for passive participation. But in my book, I’m not giving up the thrill of victory or agony of defeat because a handful of guys made it to the big leagues. I want to feel both that joy and pain firsthand, as well as see my hometown team win the series or, cheer my alma mater in the Final Four.

Media frenzy is turning team sports from participant/player to follower/fan. Add to that the billions of dollars spent by adoring fans on all kinds of team identity items — from tickets to bobble-head dolls all the way to the latest trend of “equipment-envy memorabilia.” That’s when, for a ridiculous sum of money, you can own the smelly jersey of a superstar who plays a game you wish you could. The scenario repeats for movie stars and rock stars, too. Plenty of unseemly items are available on eBay for fans willing to pay a lot to feel like part of a celebrity’s life.

The media’s ability to yarn the false perception that a player deserves more admiration than those viewing at home happens purely by the fervor in which they cover an event. They perpetuate a sensationalism that will lead to greater market share and higher revenues. Still, it leaves the guy on the street isolated from the process and crammed with false expectations.



Another group not seen every day on TV, in movies, or on sports fields also wants power over us. They’re the senior executives atop the biggest companies in the country. They sit contently as the master strategists behind the machine that drives consumer

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spending habits. In effect, they wield great power over how men see themselves.

To battle their impact, we can buy only one share of their publicly traded company and take back your voice, at least in a psychological way. Your stockholder vote represents a start in your own empowerment for change.

Through all of these scenarios of special interests breathing down the neck of manhood, remember this: No one is any better than *you*, despite what might appear to be true based on the way the media portrays these well-orchestrated archetypes in society. The reality is, no one can live up to the false standards that have been set. But in the end, most men (and women, too) are very much the same — a concept brought home by the tragic death of singer Whitney Houston whose life lacked balance and grace despite her fame and extraordinary talent.

Regardless of the fodder served up by the media, people all have flaws, and that’s what’s so beautiful and special about mankind. And the potential to find common ground in that specialness can actually catapult mankind to the next level as a species.

Yes, maybe some of those who set unachievable standards had a parent who made them sing in perfect harmony, a father who pushed them at golf until no stroke was wasted, or a mother who promoted ballet practice until deformities set in — all striving to make their children the best. But in the whole picture, they’re no better than you or me, their children no more special than yours or mine. They love no stronger, smile no brighter, or see a sunset more beautifully than you do. They are no more deserving of admiration than you are!

HUMPHREY BOGART





Remember the survey mentioned earlier? All of the men who responded cited superheroes portrayed sensationally in the media except two. Of the two, the first gave the name of a United States president (who ironically had been an actor); the other, an African-American man, named his dad.

The second man told me his dad grew up during the civil rights movement and fought in the social trenches of racism to get a leg up. He was no stranger to working hard and facing incredible odds. In a country where minority immigrants forged the American backbone, no group had a tougher climb up the economic ladders than the African-Americans who rose from atrocities to provide platforms so their children could live fruitful lives.

That one African-American man represents those who have taken a cultural heritage of suffering and transferred it into a standard of excellence, developing balance and self-satisfaction in the process.

In today's reality, we are bombarded 24/7 through phones, computers and big screens by big corporations imploring

us to spend more on their products to (supposedly) make our lives better. They're delivered through super images that can potentially deprive us of our true identity.

Consider the genuine legacy of our male ancestors millenniums ago who forged a standard of self-confidence not defined by media idols but by personal strength and self-reliance. Or look to those who, as recently as 200 years ago, pioneered, civilized and crafted a new country into the greatest nation in history — all based on the reality around them.

Those who eked out change after change to make a positive difference weren't the kind of men who sought approval from fabricated media icons. Rather, they earned admiration for their resilient individualism. Based on an ideal and a spirit found deep inside, these true heroes throughout history accepted who they were and used their strengths to move themselves — and mankind — to the next step in evolution.

And we all can be part of that legacy if we choose.