

Britney Spears and the Costs of Celebrity

by Theodore Dalrymple



A friend of mine defines a [Britney Spears](#), I did not know what she did for a living, or why she was famous. Was she an actress, an athlete, a singer, or merely an influencer with large buttocks? In fact, I was not even quite sure of her sex: her first name seemed to me only slightly more feminine than masculine.

It was during a long road journey in France that I first learned of her efforts to escape the legal tutelage under which she had long been placed. I stopped for a break and bought a newspaper that devoted its first three pages to the story as if it were important. And I have to admit that it had all the fascination of, say, a good Victorian case of the poisoning of a husband or heiress with arsenic.

There was a photograph taken in 2008 just after she had been tattooed and her head shaved. According to the newspaper, she submitted to these disfigurements in protest against the constant intrusion into her life of her fans and paparazzi.

Retirement into private life might have been a better solution to the problem: celebrity of her kind is soon forgotten.

But the desire for such celebrity is so strong that it easily outweighs any associated drawbacks or inconveniences.

Many people would rather be known for something outrageous than not be known at all: for them, a few minutes of fame or notoriety justify or validate an entire life. They are therefore more than willing to exhibit themselves to the world: they are eager to do so.

I first realized this rather more than twenty years ago when a newspaper learned that I had not had a television for thirty years (which was regarded almost as a perversion in those days) and asked me whether I would agree to watch one for a week and report on my impressions.

The newspaper would supply the television, and I agreed to the proposal on one condition; that at the end of the week it would take the television away again. Although the newspaper had a reputation for complete lack of scruple, on this occasion it was as good as its word.

I turned on the television after a hiatus of thirty years and the first program was one of those shows in which people parade their social pathology for the delectation of a prurient audience.

In this case, it was a middle-class mother who complained that her three daughters, aged 12, 13 and 14, had left home to become drug-taking prostitutes. (I knew of such cases from

medical practice: degradation has its attractions for some.)

The producers of the program had done their homework and traced the 12, 13, and 14 year-old drug-taking prostitutes, whom the studio audience applauded wildly as they tripped down the stairs on to the set, there to start berating their mother for having neglected them.

I was, of course, both appalled and fascinated: how easy it would be to immerse oneself in this kind of thing and wallow in it voyeuristically for hours. Drinks, snacks, and degradation: what better way could there be to relax?

Not far from the hospital in which I worked lived a fat alcoholic who would sometimes call an ambulance and tell it to [expletive deleted] off when it arrived because it was no longer needed.

He had three enormously fat daughters living with him, all of whom had become pregnant by the same man. (They were so fat that their pregnancies made the Virgin Birth seem like an everyday occurrence.)

A television company got wind of this—it advertised for such stories—and paid the three daughters what for them was an immense sum to appear on a show, which they were only too proud and happy to do.

It was probably the highlight of their existence so far, and perhaps would be so for the rest of their lives. Thus shamelessness became a source of pride.

Where exhibitionism is a means of achievement (and for many people the *only* means of achievement), it is hardly surprising—indeed, it is perfectly logical—that public conduct should become ever more outlandish, for what was once outlandish becomes so commonplace that it ceases to attract notice.

And in an age of celebrity, not to be noticed is not to exist; not to be famed even within a small circle is to experience humiliation.

To have melted unseen and unnoticed into a crowd is to be a complete failure and is the worst of fates, even if by doing so one performs useful work. If Descartes were alive today, he would say not 'I think, therefore I am', but 'I am famous, therefore I am'.

Celebrity has become a desideratum in itself, disconnected from any achievement that might justifiably result in it. Since I have never knowingly heard any of Spears' songs, though I probably have done so unknowingly, I cannot comment on whether or not she deserves her fame.

I am inclined to doubt it, because no one deserves such fame, but I might be mistaken. Certainly the titles of her songs that the newspaper printed are not such as suggest someone unwilling to be in the public eye.

The length and terms of her conservatorship seem extraordinary to me, almost as if she were a performing circus animal rather than an adult human being: and if her behavior has often been self-destructive, self-destructiveness is a human right and not grounds for indefinite legally-sanctioned and -required infantilization.

Unremitting insanity might on occasion justify it, but such insanity would be incompatible with the career that she has had.

The kind of incompetence in life that she seems long to have displayed is now commonplace—increasingly commonplace, if my medical experience is anything to go by.

One reason for this spread of incompetence is the desire for celebrity at any cost in the absence of any other values, as the most desirable of all achievements, which encourages and

even requires disordered personal conduct. If this upward trend continues, we shall one day all need to be placed under conservatorships.

First published in the