

*Guest Commentary*

# Why Do Heroes Die?

## Publicist Michael Levine Investigates the Psyche Behind Celebrity Suicides

**BY MICHAEL LEVINE**

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It would be hard to construct a story with a protagonist who had more to live for than Kurt Cobain. After all, he had achieved in a short time near-divine status in the eyes of millions, possessing what almost all of us seek—wealth, fame, success.

So why did Cobain and so many other superstar celebrities like Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland, Elvis Presley, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, John Belushi and River Phoenix commit or virtually commit suicide?

The answers at first seem to defy logic. How could Elvis Presley, who in his own lifetime achieved such legendary status that even his own close friends and family called him "The King," die alone in his own house a pathetic drug addict? Over 14 different drugs were found in his body, including morphine, phenobarbital, and codeine (the latter at a concentration 10 times higher than the toxic level). During the last two-and-a-half years of his life, nearly 20,000 doses of narcotic stimulants, sedatives, and anti-depressants prescribed by one doctor alone entered his body. Others have claimed that Elvis used women the same way he used drugs.

In some ways, it seems Marilyn Monroe was the female equivalent of Elvis. Worshipped as the sex goddess of our time, her non-public life contained pressures similar to Presley's.

Why? Do heroes know levels of pain and desperation that we mortals simply can't fathom? Can their unique tragedies even begin to explain why so many non-celebrities attempt suicide every year?

These questions have led me to wonder if partial answers don't lie in everyone's life, because it seems that what kills mega-stars like Cobain, Morrison, Elvis, Belushi, Monroe, and Garland just might lie dormant in all of us.

I realize this sounds strange at first, noting that just about everyone desires to be loved and congratulated in the way these heroes were. But I believe that anyone who is intellectually honest must admit that there is something terribly unreal and harmful about being unconditionally loved by everyone and pushed toward the sky like a god. Psychologists have studied the similar experiences of models and beautiful women who have been objects of honor, devotion, and lust. Although the women were initially flattered and excited by the attention, ultimately almost all of them experienced a feeling of hollowness and before long develop contempt for the men. This often leads to feelings of aloneness, guilt, depression and a paradoxical anger because adulation has come too easily. This seems to confirm the theory that for self-esteem to feel real it must be earned, and few people feel worthy of the level of unmitigated praise heaped upon heroes.

History is pregnant with the tales of the paradox of human nature: fame and adulation have often been people's highest goals, and yet just as often these attributes have corrupted those who attained them. This may help explain why many performers become emotionally asphyxiated—desperately clinging to drugs, alcohol, sex and more to bring them back to Eden. This attempt at what theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace" never works. Our heroes feel betrayed with nowhere to go. It is not surprising therefore that several of Elvis' biographers reported that he was obsessed with death in the last years of his life.

In explaining the feelings of mega-stars, analysts have drawn comparisons to children who have feelings of rage toward parents who "over-love" them while demanding nothing in return. This often develops into feelings of tremendous guilt in the children. They then feel forced to turn the hate back on themselves, until it often becomes unbearable. The analogy between the deeply troubled celebrities and the familiar spoiled child syndrome portrays both as people who have undeservedly been given too much too soon, without earning it.

All of this involves a basic principle that must be comprehended deeply. For an angry, guilty, conflict-ridden person, the level of pleasure experienced is directly proportionate to the intensity of pain relieved. So, say you burn your finger. It hurts. You put it under cold water. It feels better. Had you not burned your finger in the first place, running cold water on it would not have made it feel any better. You crave a certain kind of pleasure, but in reality the pleasure is only the relief of pain. Of course logic demands that the worse the pain—physical or psychological—the more pleasurable the relief.

So you can see how drugs or alcohol become instant objects for our Pooh-Bahs\*. It is generally agreed that people use drugs and drink to diminish their consciousness and/or their sense of self-consciousness.

In one of the few non-self-aggrandizing statements Donald Trump has ever made publicly, he outlined his feeling on the treacherous nature of great fame. "Drugs, I believe, are only a symptom of the problems that come with great success," he said. "From what I've seen, it's fame itself that bends people out of shape.

As mentioned earlier, what seems to destroy so many celebrities is staggeringly familiar to what has long been called the spoiled-child syndrome, namely being given too much, too soon, or put another way, achieving self-esteem without having done something worthy of intense, unending praise. Normally, people work hard to earn their money and hence know the value of a dollar. They experience a sense of achievement in really earning it. The self-discipline, denial and sometimes frustration they submit to in order to achieve their goals helps to develop character. Only through this character development can real self-esteem be achieved.

So if these things are known, isn't there anything our heroes can do? Haven't we progressed enough as a people that there are some clear warning signs to help blow the whistle on our troubled friends?

The answers to these questions aren't fully clear but the sad stories about our idols may help teach something worth learning. Dostoyevsky properly said, "Where there is no God, all is permitted." The point, as it seems to relate to the famous, is that if there is nothing higher than you, nothing to keep you in check as it were, then there are no rules and all is permitted. Excess often follows and excess is a slippery slop indeed.

What are the things that seem to vaccinate against total self-involvement and ultimately self-destruction? Families and children may help. "It's hard to think of yourself as a deity when a little human being is vomiting on you," said one top Hollywood agent. A belief in a higher spiritual force or a God to whom you are accountable also seems helpful. "Religions that brought the concept of 'thou shalt not' to the world often provide the necessary limits for functioning in an often troubling world," says Father Michael Manning, author of *Questions and Answers About Today's Catholics*.

It would seem that anyone in the rare position of receiving hero worship would do well to place things in their life that cultivate humility with the same tenacity they should acquire life insurance.

So ironically, celebrities and heroes who rise to the highest of heights, becoming near-deities in their own time, are denied the pain and friction that teaches us to distinguish the false from the real. As was said to the King of Egypt by the ancient Greek mathematician Euclid, "There is no royal road to learning." People can prepare a smooth path for a King to move on but no one can make it easy for the King or anyone else to learn. If we wish to learn, we must work for ourselves.

\*Pooh-Bah—A self-important person of high position and great influence. Pooh-Bah is a character in Gilbert and Sullivan's 19th Century operetta *The Mikado*; his title is Lord-High-Everything-Else.