I'm Nobody! Who are you? Are you – Nobody – Too? Then there's a pair of us? Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody! How public – like a Frog – To tell one's name – the livelong June – to an admiring Bog!

THE SERMON "Being a Real Nobody" Rev. Victoria Weinstein

I'm nobody! Who are you? What wonderful lines, written in that coy voice she sometimes assumed, by the belle of Amherst, Miss Emily Dickinson. Emily was apparently happy to be a "nobody," as she famously avoided most human company and stayed sequestered in her room and in the rooms of her mind, weaving poems that very few people cared about in her lifetime. Of course she's very famous now, and I wonder sometimes if she would have liked all the attention she receives in literature departments across the world, or if she would have smiled indulgently at it and quoted herself by saying,

Publication – is the Auction Of the Mind of Man – ... But reduce no Human Spirit To Disgrace of Price –

Emily Dickinson and other famous recluses notwithstanding, celebrities will always be with us, it seems, and it seems as though they always have been. The advent of mass media has been the biggest influence in the explosion of celebrity culture in the 20th century – think of it – George Washington may have been very famous in the 18th century, but most people had no really clear idea what he looked like. If you were a "fan" of someone in that time, I guess you'd

have to carry around a small portrait of them with you. The celebrity culture in America really came into its own in the 1930's, with the advent of the publicity departments out of the major movie studios, whose entire job was to keep their stable of stars in the news. So today we think nothing of it when Julia Robert's newborn twins make the front page, or when Ben Affleck breaks another engagement. It's someone's job to make sure those actors under contract make the news on a regular basis. As a result, we generally accept the notion that a good deal of the so-called news is comprised of entertainment industry gossip. Such is the price of fame... for us all.

I want to confess something to you, something some of you will find unsavory: I read *Star*. And not just in the dentist's office. I buy *US* magazine and *Star* now and then, and I read *Entertainment Weekly* well, weekly. Sometimes, when no one's looking, I go straight to the celebrity gossip link on the internet before getting to the really important stories. And I have no real idea why I do this, except for the thrill of glamour-by-association, and just because I'm downright fascinated by celebrities. I am fascinated by their excesses, by their monumental need to be affirmed, by their fawning air-kissing of each other, by their broken loves and what they name their babies and most especially, lately, with their plastic surgery. I find their exhausting need for attention captivating, and I wonder how many of them hate true fame when they finally achieve it.

There may be some among you whose lives and opinions are utterly untouched by the cult of celebrity within which we live today. You yawned through all of Liz Taylor's marriages, and you were unimpressed by the Dionne quintuplets and Shirley Temple and you *never* cared what came between Brooke

Shields and her Calvins. The famously insane and destructive, like Charles Manson or Jim Jones, you were able to quickly dismiss as crackpots and go on with your day. All of manner of celebrities whiz by your interior landscape without making any kind of imprint. Well, I'm jealous. I wish I had your ability to ignore it all. And while we're talking about celebs today, I was wondering... would you like to read my latest issue of *Star*? [headline: BRAD AND JEN ROMP ON ROMANTIC CHRISTMAS VACATION!]

Cintra Wilson, who has written a thoroughly nasty and really funny expose on celebrity called *A Massive Swelling: Celebrity Re-Examined as a Grotesque Crippling Disease*, writes, "There is a little bit of talent in most famous people, even if they're only good-looking – something for all the attention to stick to. Talent is not, however, the reason for fame any more, nor is it the thing one really becomes famous for – one earns fame by notoriety, or one gets fame by having fame. The good old way of getting famous was to be very good at something artistic, and have everybody fall in love with you for it." That doesn't happen so much anymore, she explains, since achieving fame-worthy *excellence* in some field is no longer important. Fame is apparently the end in and of itself. Fame is desired, Wilson says, "so one can get plastic surgery and go to parties in order to lick and be licked upon by other famous people like puppies in a basket."

What Wilson points to (and entertainingly so, I think), is the difference between older notions of fame and what I will call *nouveau* famous. We used to assume that fame came to someone who had with achieved something – even a notorious achievement such as the one credited to Lizzie Borden. Famous people *did* something, and therefore they were at least minimally worthy of our

interest and attention. Why <u>not</u> sit around the breakfast table discussing an Albert Einstein or a Sylvia Plath or a Sigmund Freud or a Gloria Steinem? These were people who achieved fame largely for their ideas and for their actual influence on culture. If we couldn't help but be interested in how they dressed or what toothpaste they used or who they dated, isn't that understandable? The draw of celebrity in each of these cases is that these individuals were all engaged in some intense sense of life calling that just happened to put them at the center of attention. They drew us by their inner passion; we did not have our interest in them manufactured for us by a publicist.

It all seems petty and ridiculous, this fame game, but humans have learned through the ages that fame is a thing that grants power, fame is sexy, and fame often brings with it great, obscene amounts of wealth. What else, for heaven's sake, could turn someone like Pedro Martinez -- a kid from the Dominican Republic --into a beloved superstar ball player with buckets and buckets of money who *still* complains about his salary and his status, and leaves the team and the city that adores him for more money and more status?? The corrosions and insanities of fame! (You can tell I'm just a little bit upset about this!) Fame is something Americans are particularly obsessed with, and our celebrities are something we import to other parts of the globe along with American-identified products such as Coca-Cola and McDonald's.

Which brings me to "nouveau" celebrity, the phenomenon of those who are famous for being famous. These are the reality show participants whose quest for a husband or a recording contract or to successfully ingest blended rats earns them fifteen minutes or so of fame, and they make the news for a time afterward as though they are people who have accomplished something. Those

of us who don't watch reality television shows are baffled when they hear these names, and we wonder what these people have said, done or thought is worth reporting. The answer is "nothing." They are famous for being famous. That should solve the question of Paris Hilton for you. She's famous for being rich and famous, and for coining the vacuous phrase, "That's hot!" (Here's a new phrase for you, Miss Hilton: "My life is for itself and not a spectacle." – Ralph Waldo Emerson). I will not dwell on these characters, as I assume they trouble you very little, they are easy enough to see for the dismissable fluff they really are as public figures, however much we wish them well as individual human beings.

In general, the foibles of the famous serve as entertainment for those of us who aren't famous, they fuel a certain portion of the economy, and it is a fairly easy job for us to stop occasionally and reflect on how much of our time and money is spent fueling the fame industry, and to manage that "investment" wisely and well. More importantly, it is worthwhile for us to occasionally stop and consider whether or not our sense of our *own* lives is negatively affected by the pageant of the lives of the rich and famous which we are always having displayed before us, like a fancy rug we are not allowed to step on.

And let us consider, too, the influence of celebrities who are famous for one talent, such as acting, and who use their fame from one arena as a launching pad to an entirely different sphere of power in the world. This launch is often from a place of artistic ability and influence to a place of political activism, or even to political power. Jane Fonda did it in Hanoi. Sean Penn did it in Iraq: both of these award-winning actors earning much wrath when they criticized our country's policies in those regions. Some said, "They're citizens, they have a

right to their opinion." Others argued that they were using their fame to make a "statement" and that they should keep their opinions to themselves and go back to something they understand, like making movies.

Ronald Reagan's political career was very likely boosted by his likeable screen persona as an all-American hero, and Arnold Schwarzenegger rode his tough-guy movie image all the way to the governor's mansion in California, as did celebrity pro-wrestler Jesse Ventura in Minnesota. Audrey Hepburn used her screen popularity to good effect as a long-time spokeswoman for UNICEF, and Angelina Jolie is currently doing much the same, currently traveling the globe as an ambassador for refugees and activist against landmines.

This is not to say that celebrities are by definition unfit to act as leaders outside the sphere of their chosen craft or profession. But I encourage us all to be more conscious of how celebrity opinion is being marketed to us, along with celebrity products, as though fame *itself* endows the famous with special insight and wisdom, no matter what their initial area of expertise or achievement. I think it's worth critically examining how much celebrity culture we are, in fact, ingesting, and how it influences how we think, how we raise our children, what we purchase, what books we read, and who is benefiting from our consuming of these ideas and products.

In this generation, where we are so comfortable chucking out traditional sources of wisdom because they are troublesome, or limited, or difficult to understand, we will, for example, nevertheless watch a man named "Dr. Phil" day after day, panting on the treadmill all the while, nodding our heads and never wondering what mechanism made it possible for this person to be in the position of hawking not only his opinions, but dozens of his products, to us.

Madonna gets into some esoteric form of Kabbalah and suddenly Kabbalah is all the rage for spiritual seekers. Anna Nicole Smith reduces using some kind of herbal product, and it flies off the shelves. When I find myself mesmerized by these stories I ask myself, as I ask you: *Are these people really qualified to take up so much space in our heads?*?

It's hard to stay sharp on this. I sat down recently to watch a show on public television that featured a panel with the Dalai Lama. It was facilitated by an NPR reporter and I was happily watching away, until I stopped to ask myself, "Why is actress Susan Sarandon sitting next to the Dalai Lama? She's a very talented actress and intelligent woman, but is she really the most appropriate person they could find to share the stage with one of the great spiritual leaders of our time, answering questions alongside him as though a peer?" (Did you see Richard Gere's spot that was broadcast to the Palestinians immediately before their election? In the true spirit of celebrity humility, Gere prefaced his plea that Palestinians all get to the polls by saying, "Hello, I'm Richard Gere, and I speak on behalf of the whole world...")

The antidote to all of this celebrity consumption, is, of course, to invest our own sense of our own lives with the glamour they deserve, and to try to be at least as enchanted and drawn by the comings and goings of our local characters – whose lives are, I promise you, as thrilling as any soap opera — as we would by the red carpet-walkers on "Entertainment Tonight." It seems an awful lot to me lately as though we are racing past each other in the stores and on the streets, ignoring the beauty of all the unique, wonderful "nobodies" around us while we zoom home to turn on the telly and get the latest dish on some famous actor or

athlete or reality TV star. We are missing so many sacred stories this way, and missing whole parts of our own lives.

To be a real nobody is a life-long project, an honor if achieved. I have never known any more miserable than those who grasped at fame just for the sake of it, and never so happy as when I see someone abandon the project of fame-seeking and get on with the work of constructing their life for authentic reasons. Fame or celebrity may come anyway, but it is a by-product and not an end in itself, and therefore is an interesting development that does not subsume the larger goal of living a meaningful life.

Let me close with my favorite story about being a real nobody:

A rabbi rushes into his synagogue in a fit of religious frenzy and falls to his knees before the ark, beating his chest and crying, "I'm nobody! I'm nobody!" The cantor of the synagogue is impressed by this example of spiritual humility and joins the rabbi on his knees. "I'm nobody, I'm nobody!" The shamus, the custodian, watches from the corner and can't restrain himself, either. He joins the other two on his knees, calling out, "I'm nobody! I'm nobody!" So then the rabbi nudges the cantor with his elbow and points over at the custodian. And he says, "Look who thinks he's nobody!" (Chassid Traditional, from *Soul Food: Stories to Nourish the Spirit and the Heart*, Jack Kornfield and Christina Feldman, p. 228)

I wish us all the blessing of being a *real* nobody, not with false humility and not for show, but to cultivate a sense of the richness of our inner life – a task from which we are easily distracted by the constant parade of celebrities whose appeal is being used to worm its way into our consciousness and then into our wallets. Emily Dickinson knew what she was talking about when she wrote, with a spirit Paris Hilton would do well to embrace:

Fame of Myself, to justify All other Plaudits be Superfluous – An Incense Beyond Necessity – Fame of Myself to lack – Although My Name be else Supreme – This were an Honor honorless – a futile Diadem. Amen, Miss Dickinson. Amen. *That's* hot.