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Leadership

Tiger and the Good Life

Celebrities and obituaries offer competing definitions of what's worth pursuing.

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Monday, December 14, 2009

For the moment, you cannot look at a newspaper, magazine, TV or website without running into the name Tiger Woods. What is behind our endless and growing fascination with celebrities?

Dallas Willard writes that there are four fundamental questions that every world view—and every human being—must answer. Whether we want to or not; whether we do it well or poorly, whether we've illiterate or have five Ph.D.'s, we must assume something is true about: What is real?

Who has "the good life"?

Who is a good person?

How do you become a good person?

Our preoccupation with celebrities has to do largely with question #2. We are not computers, not robots—we will inevitably pursue a life that we think is desirable. If we become convinced that the good life is unattainable to us, it can lead to despair or even suicide. Many thought leaders inside the church and outside often criticize churches for appealing to people's desire for self-fulfillment in the name of "relevance." They have a point.

But the question of who has the good life is woven into the human heart with fine stitching, and cannot be rooted out without tearing the heart itself. We cannot address it simply by pointing out how people pursue it wrongly.

We often associate the good life with access to money or pleasure or success or attractiveness. A magazine published in southern California was actually called *The Good Life*. Based on its ads the good life could be pursued primarily by fine dining and weight reduction, which is a little paradoxical when you think about it. (Although it's also a little Christmas-y; the fine dining comes in December and the vows for weight reduction in January). The pursuit of the good life generally involves assets that we believe celebrities possess. We are fascinated with them because we suspect they have the life we want.

When there is a mess involving a celebrity, we're fascinated because often we think that if we had all the good stuff the celebrity had we would be smarter; we would be able to enjoy the good life. Writer Alain de Botton notes one of the main differences between ancient tragedy and modern tabloid journalism is that tragedies called for us to identify with the central character—what happened to him could happen to me. Tabloid journalism invites us to pass judgment—I would never be that stupid; he must not be normal and healthy like me.

The deeper issue, though, is that no one ever entered into the good life by trying to pursue the good life. In the early days of AA, a little group around founder Bill W noticed that he was becoming increasingly enamored with the attention he was getting as the spokesman of this new movement. They warned him that the attention would become as addictive and deadly as the

bottle for him. Out of this came a decision that no one would become wealthy from AA, and no one would become famous.

It's why they now only use initials instead of last names in telling their stories publicly. They decided that their fallenness meant that fame and money were spiritual forces that were simply too powerful and too dangerous for them to allow at the center of their communal motivations.

It is interesting how often the evangelical community gives rise to its own little set of celebrities; and how often money and fame (on a limited, evangelical scale) get held out as rewards, and how often they end up being destructive and leading to little scandals (on a limited, evangelical scale) in our world as well.

We live in the tension between our desire to have the good life and our desire to be good people. A fascinating place to see this tension on display is to open up a newspaper and compare advertisements with obituaries. Ads tell us: "here's how to have great hair, great teeth, great clothes, great food, great sex, great cars and great bodies." But obituaries never say: he had great hair, great teeth, great clothes, great food, great sex, great cars and a great body. We want to be good people, but we're willing to give it up to have the good life. We want to have what is offered in the ads but be what is spoken in the obituaries.

This is why the news of Jesus never goes away, and why it is good news. Jesus understood the connection between the good life (the blessed life; the life now available to people who thought they were rejects like those the meek or the mourners or the poor in spirit) was actually available to those who with God's presence and help were becoming genuinely good people.

If you work at a church, you are in the news business; and in this season once more people's hearts turn for a moment to the news that matters. May it be told well, and spread far ...

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