



# Prez Release

## An Infinite Appetite for Distractions

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The buzz created by the death of Michael Jackson is a microcosm of our culture. First, the mysterious entertainer is just about ready to launch a new energetic chapter in his career when he suddenly dies. His funeral is attended by thousands who win seats by an internet lottery, while the entire globe watches spellbound at an incredible array of orators and entertainers who display their gifts with excellence. A seldom seen daughter displays the innocent grief of a child who has just had her world shattered. A fiery preacher gives a closing benediction that brings shouts of *Amen* from the audience as he concludes his prayer “in the name of Jesus.”

But the saga goes on as investigative reporting uncovers layer after layer of “breaking news” about the circumstances surrounding his death. Drug usage reminiscent of the death of another “King,” Elvis Presley, is revealed and medical advisors are questioned: while conspiracy theories of murder start to arise and the 24-hour news cycle has more fuel for its ravenous engine. Predictable custody battles begin to emerge as the children’s biological mother battles with Michael Jackson’s parents for custody. Meanwhile, every available Jackson CD is bought off the shelves, the music economy is given a short-term boost in sales as companies work night and day to keep up with the demand and iTunes is smiling all the way to the bank.

Motown’s Barry Gordy anointed Jackson as the King of Entertainers, which I’m sure will lend itself to Elvis aficionados battling, blogging and tweeting over this new coronation of royalty. I don’t think this event, its tragedy and deep well of “exclusive reports”, will be over soon; though it won’t take long to eclipse its novelty with a new level of media buzz. The last few weeks of Jackson news has revealed the character of American and global culture that, arguably, is highly influenced by entertainment and entertainers.

I’ve learned or relearned several key lessons over the last few weeks:

The skills of entertainers have a longer shelf life than their mistakes. The media that crucified Jackson, during his trial several years ago, can’t seem to find accolades adequate enough to measure his professional achievements. At the very least, the painful story of Michael Jackson: his rise to fame and the price paid to maintain that fame, has to be seriously evaluated. Fame became a prison, his music and dancing were the short terms of parole and the long nights of the soul were increasingly managed chemically. Yet, our world seems to create a craving for the very “substance” that took Jackson’s life.

Our world still recognizes shattered innocence. The pained eulogy of little Paris Jackson was deemed by numerous commentators as the highlight of the funeral, outshining the Mariah Carey's or Usher's. Whatever is the reality of this sheltered child, she captured the hearts of the world with a window into her soul. Her world had been crushed by the loss of her "daddy." No words are adequate to express the sheer tragedy of a young life that has had one more mountain added to the huge task of growing up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Entertainment is more than a diversion from life. Neil Postman's classic volume, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, suggests that people will come to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think. Postman recalled the work of Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*, who warned of the consequences of failing to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions. Bottom line, what we love can ruin us, if we adore the media that can undo our capacity to think.

Followers of Jesus need to see the Jackson story as a window into the soul of the world that is rapidly becoming global and dominant. Harvard theologian, Harvey Cox, made the following observation fifteen years ago:

There was a time when Pentecostals warned themselves and anyone else who would listen not to become entangled with and dependent on the 'things of the world.' Pentecostals were suspicious of the passing fads of stylish clothing, the latest hair-do, and glitzy new consumer products. They were also, as it turns out rightly, suspicious that the powerful new mass media could be a seductive lure, tricking people into the empty value of the consumer market culture. Perhaps it is time for a rebirth of that ethic of simplicity, that suspicion of 'the things of the world' for which the early Pentecostals were so famous.

The Jackson story has been painful to watch—a man with incredible talent whose life ended so suddenly and tragically. But the remaining story is about all of us and the uncritiqued influences that come at us like a tsunami. There's more than nostalgia in watching Jackson's "Thriller" once more "for old times sake."



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