

Social Notes

By Martha Muzychka

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In the Britney circus, mental illness is still taboo

In recent weeks I have been struck by the coverage of the entertainment industry, with frequently lurid headlines ramping up the volume in hopes of capturing our fleeting attention. .

But I confess, that like many others, I have been drawn to the trainwreck that is the story of Britney Spears's life.

I never much cared for Spears or her music, but I've been drawn to a very public collapse.

However, I suspect that unlike the majority of those who flock to the web or television or magazine for the latest tidbit, there are but a few of us who wonder at the absence of any analysis or meaningful commentary on this young mother's mental health.

True, there is enough evidence to identify drug and alcohol use as contributing factors in the steady decline we have all been witness to in the past year. But each time a story about Britney's latest antic made the crawl on my news feed, I was struck anew by the invisibility of mental illness.

While I heard more than one person describe Britney as "cracked" and "wacko," there was no mention re: the possibility of postpartum depression. Instead, her disastrous performance in September at the Video Music Awards show was universally panned as a failed comeback; her critics focused almost exclusively on her weight and dishevelled appearance; and other guests made cruel jokes at her and even her children's expense.

Now, I am not going to play armchair psychiatrist; I'll leave that to Dr Phil.

But this week's news, that Britney was now an involuntary patient in a psychiatric facility, brought out into the open that this is one very unwell individual.

In retrospect, the hair shaving, the paparazzi hit and runs, the fashion mishaps that made media headlines – which pumped up the angles of loutish, white trash, self-centred rock star antics – were, in reality, the inexorable signs of an unravelling individual who was out of control, yes, but also outside of herself, uncentered, unbalanced, and unconnected.

It makes me wonder: if someone like Britney, with money and access to the best of whatever Hollywood can offer, could still spiral into mental instability to the point that her family and various members of her entourage are fighting for control of her assets,

what happens to those people who live ordinary lives until one day, unexpectedly, depression and anxiety, perhaps accompanied by delusion and mania, move in and refuse to leave?

Despite the fact that addictions and other substance use appear to be commonplace in Hollywood – if we can use the revolving door on the Betty Ford Clinic as an indicator – mental illness is still taboo.

In the story of Britney Spears, I see that stigma is alive and well, ably represented by the shamefaced whispers, the carefully worded releases, and the misrepresentation of what mental illness actually entails and what kinds of treatment are available.

Oh, and while we are at it, let's not forget the disrespect accorded those who have lost that most essential part of themselves: their hold on sanity and mental wellness.

Can you imagine another illness where it is possible to have paparazzi invade a hospital and harass patients by knocking door after door in an effort to find Britney in her own remake of the Madwoman in the Attic?

It shouldn't matter that the root of her illness is likely mental in origin. What really matters is how we, in the global sense, respond. What Britney Spears, like too many others, needs these days is compassion not derision, support not sabotage, care not abuse.

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