

Getting to the root of rankism



So this is where we find ourselves. The famous crave more fame.

It's not enough to be a celebrated anchorman making \$10 million

a year for writing a 22-minute newscast, five nights a week, which given the opportunity, many other newscasters could do just as well. It's not enough to get several weeks of vacation, a table at any hoity-toity restaurant, gushing fans, access to accomplished people and a front-row seat to every significant world event.

No, we "misremember" being shot at in a helicopter in order to aggrandize ourselves further.

My father was in combat. It's not something we "misremember."

We're a wealthy and famous musician adored by millions. This success may be a byproduct of luck, marketing and subjective tastes more than talent, but regardless, we're at the top of the heap, the promised land that every garage band and street corner musician dreams about. So what do we do, not once, but twice? We steal the moment from another musician at the Grammy Awards because, well, by God, we're an important person. What we say matters more than what others do or say, including the hundreds of qualified Grammy vot-

ers.

As an aside, if we're Beyonce, we might have another worry. The guy either has an unhealthy fixation or is auditioning for a new reality show "Celebrity Stalking Celebrity."

We're Paris Hilton, whichever Kardashian, a family living in the bush of Alaska, a you-name-it-politician ranging from a Veterans Affairs executive lying about serving in Special Forces to a self-promoting mayor to a selfie-taking president, a "Celebrity Apprentice" contestant, all-things Trump or any YouTube "watch me, watch me, watch me" video or Facebook post.

Not me, we say. But yes, to one degree or another, you and me.

More than ever, we're an attention-craving, hand-waving, jumping-up-and-down, ain't-I-special, me-me-me society.

We want to be somebody and too many of us are willing to go to great lengths to do so. In his book, "Look at Me!," Orville Gilbert Brim, an award-winning scholar and author on human development, intelligence, ambition and personality, notes that over "4 million adults in the United States say that becoming famous is the most important goal in their lives."

Not improving their little corner of the world. Not starting a business that serves themselves, family and customers. Not teaching. Not volunteering

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or engaging in nonprofit work. Not raising a family or caring for those with no family.

Nope, fame is the goal.

Notably, however, Daryl Nelson, in a Consumer Affairs article, "Why Are Young People So Obsessed with Becoming Famous?" also relates Brim's assertion "that the percentage of people wanting to become famous hasn't really increased that much over the years, and it's just the fact that there are more avenues today for people to become celebrities, so it just seems like today's kids want fame more than the kids of past generations."

So is our hand-wringing much ado about nothing?

No, according to Robert W. Fuller, author of "Somebodies and Nobodies."

Writing in Psychology Today, "Why Do We Want To Be Famous?," Fuller argues there is a deeper, more disturbing issue associated with this fame-at-all-costs ideology and "that a wish for fame belies the existence of a crippling, undiagnosed malady, one rather like malnutrition, except that it's a disease of the self, not the body."

That disease, rankism, Fuller calls it, is what "somebodies do to nobodies." Rankism ranges from political patronage to celebrities who jump the line at crowded clubs to VIP lounges at ball games and airports to the disconnect between high-living CEOs and underpaid sweatshop workers to excluding someone from our coffee group at the local diner.

"Fame," says Fuller, "promises an escape from whatever ghetto we're in, real or imagined. It deters detractors and may even squeeze a few crumbs of recognition from those who have begrudged us a smile while we were clawing our way out of Nobodyland."

At the root of rankism, and the craving for fame to overcome it, is a loss of individual dignity in a world that judges us on what we do, where we went to school, who we know, how much money we make and many other measurements of so-called worthiness. It's the loss of recognition of people as

individuals and the notion that we all are unique and have value simply by being.

"Michael," my mother said, "never ask how much money someone makes or what they're serving if they invite you for supper."

Maybe not everyone received such parental admonitions. Or we've sipped the communal rankism wine and in combination with the dizzying 24/7/365 media buzz shucked good manners and humility in pursuit of some sort, any sort, of recognition.

Andy Warhol's 15 minutes broken down into spastic seconds of interminable self-centered tweets, Facebook posts and uploaded videos.

So perhaps we're too harsh on the famous anchorman and the overbearing musician. Maybe they carry scars from "clawing ... out of Nobodyland" and are products of a rankism culture who believe they must constantly affirm their status as somebody, fearful that any slippage may relegate them to the ranks of nobodies.

And isn't that a fear all status-conscious social media butterflies share?

Except you and me, of course.

Mike Pemberton, a novelist and English teacher with Danville Area Community College, lives in Hoopeston and can be contacted at www.mikepembertonbooks.com.