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Demigods

When individual lives become symbolic, when they absorb into themselves human meaning that helps us see, feel know ourselves more deeply, those lives are heroic. These people become demigods. Neda Agha-Soltan, Farrah Fawcett and Michael Jackson have died. Yet, in their living and in their dying, we see human apotheosis.

In ancient Greek religion, the demigod was often the human born of human and divine parents. They possessed liminal powers that allowed them to cross the threshold between life and death and to interpret divinity to humanity and humanity to itself. They were venerated heroes and sheroes, gifted with a special grace.

Christianity names this grace charisma. We think of charisma in relation to a certain magnetism that draws attention. This magnetic grace shows itself in some extraordinary qualities, set of qualities or talents that gives these individuals power to redeem the time, to understand and to capture a moment of history that changes a world within the multitude of worlds in which we live.

Neda Agha-Soltan is the young Iranian protestor who became world famous at the moment of her death. Her sacred human blood bled shed and stained a Tehran street for the sake of righteous truth. She was young, beautiful, a student of Islamic philosophy and of tourism. She studied music and enjoyed travelling the world. She was not an activist. She only wanted to be one in the number to show her concern over the Iranian election. She had come to stand for her universal human right to peaceful assembly and association. She wanted to see her country honor the right of people to select their government through a "genuine election."

Her government killed her and revealed its own immorality, its own illegitimacy, its own weakness. Now her life and death are symbolic of this moment in Iranian and world history. This is a moment when new technologies make a local demonstration a global event with individuals throughout the world watching in real time. She is now a global shero, a demigoddess.

Farrah Fawcett was famous for years. She was a pin-up girl at the intersection of female sexuality and female capability. Liberated ladies could know the power of their sexual selves with no shame. However, she wanted to project more than the angel sexy private detective going after the bad guys with her best girls. So, she took on unglamorous roles, most notably, The Burning Bed a television movie that told the story of a battered woman who is raped by her husband. She sets his bed on fire as he sleeps. Fawcett also filmed her struggle with cancer. She invited the world to see her suffering and her loss.

And then there is Michael Jackson, the King of Pop. His music became background sound, words, rhythms, moves, image and images that punctuated our lives. Driving down city streets, rural roads, interstate highways the radio plays and we sang and still sing all the words to the songs in perfect sync, remembering a particular episode of our own life's continuing drama.

Even as a child, Michael Jackson was large, blessed with a talent and grace and charisma that left us breathless. His talent awed the great and small. Fred Astaire marveled at his dancing. His talent reached around the globe. With his great talent came great complexity, legal trouble, and troubling behavior with children. The man child grew into an androgynous child man. The cute black boy morphed into a man with white skin and a face crafted by plastic surgeons.

Through it all, we still danced to his music and heard his moral appeals to make a better world when he asked in song if we could feel the whole world coming together. We heard his challenge to change the world by facing the man/woman in the mirror. To make the world a better place, we ought to change our own behavior. He sang: "Heal the World." He was a genius whose genius heart finally had sense enough to quit and to spare him another bruising tour and more human cruelty.

The lives that become symbolic, that are large, become even larger when they transition from time into eternity. They reach apotheosis because they allowed their charisma to reflect humanity back to itself. They helped us to know and to express our feelings. They stood in our place. They showed us our glamour and our ordinariness, our triumphs and tragedies, our seriousness and silliness, our loves, fears, and dancing celebration of life. They gave us hope that a world of love is possible.

It is the quality of their true humanity that lifts them to the level of the demigod. May they each find peace in the Afterlife.