

THE VENOMOUS EFFECTS OF APPROVAL

When he was fourteen years old, Paul Hewson's mother died of a brain hemorrhage at his grandfather's funeral. Paul spent much of his teenage years feeling rebellious and confused, with an overwhelming feeling of regret that he had never expressed his true feelings to his mother. According to Paul, "My mother's death just threw petrol on the fire ... I felt hopeless. I thought about suicide."

Paul channeled his grief into playing the piano. Meanwhile, his father repeatedly told him it was not worth having dreams because he would never achieve them. Then one day Paul returned home and the piano was gone. His father had sold it. In Paul's words:

If you were a kid like me, that is like somebody taking away your oxygen tank. You can't breathe. ... I think the seeds of ambition were sown, paradoxically by this repression of the spirit. ... I was going to have my revenge on the world. Everyone was going to have to listen to me!

He wanted others to listen so badly that he took up singing—loudly. So loudly, in fact, that one of his teenage friends claimed he was singing for the deaf. His friend nicknamed him after a hearing aid shop they passed regularly in Dublin called "Bona vox" ("Good voice"). Over two decades later, the songwriter and lead singer of the world's most successful music group (U2 has won twenty-two Grammy Awards, more than any other group in history) is still making sure his voice is heard. In Bono's words:

You don't become a rock star unless you've got something missing somewhere, that is obvious to me. If you were of sound mind

or a more complete person, you could feel normal without 70,000 people a night screaming their love for you.

When the approval fades and they cease to be the flavor of the month, many celebrities have little remaining. Then come the drugs, the infighting, the self-destruction—anything to avoid the vacant sense of a Self they never took the time to construct. While some celebrities—like Bono, who used his rock-star status to launch a one-man campaign for debt relief to alleviate poverty in developing countries—show us how high we can rise if we believe we can, others provide our most intensified living examples of the hollow shells we can become due to the venomous effects of approval.

The problem is that your *appreciation* of approval comes from the same place within that causes *depreciation*—of your Self—when you don't get it. When you seek approval you give control of your life to others, who can then manipulate you based on giving or withholding it. Your parents or other authority figures may believe they know how you should live your life. When you win their approval, you can note that—unless their praise hinges solely on your living according to *your* values—this victory means you have been successful in pursuing *their* ambitions and approaching your life the way they would if they were you. They're not.

Ask yourself this one question: "Do I *want* to be liked by everyone?" If your answer is yes, your end goal translates as: "I want my actions and opinions to be aligned with the values of everyone I know." That's tantamount to answering the question, "What music do you like?" with "Whatever is currently in the Top Forty," or responding to the question, "What is your favorite football team?" by exclaiming, "Whichever team wins the Super Bowl." Opinions are like friends: choose a few and your life has meaning. Choose them all and you end up with none.