

Larger Than Life

It seems that all too often, in the past decade alone, we have seen the tragedy of death, disease, or injury strike one of our most beloved Americans. What's even worse is that thousands or millions of our other Americans, "just down the road" from us, have suffered the same fate, generally without our knowledge or concern. For each and every one, it is a tragedy on a personal level.

All of them are robbed of the opportunity to continue contributing to the world in the same way they have in the past. The difference with those who are famous is that, because they are publicly noted for their contributions to our culture, our society, and our entertainment, the tragedy is more apparent to us. Our typical reactions are regret, sadness, and, most of all, disbelief. How could this happen to someone so talented, well-liked, respected, young? Why did this have to happen?

If everything happens for a reason, the answers to the question "Why?" must be in the lessons we learn from their examples and in the greater good that results from their experiences. Those still among us are the real superstars. None of them have left the spotlight to wallow in self-pity. They all teach by example the true value of unconditional love for both one's self and for others. All have learned to live every moment of life to its fullest and have provided inspiration to the rest of us to do the same. Each has taken his or her tragedy and turned it into an opportunity to educate and gain support from the masses for conditions that were often not perceived as important in the past. This awareness also helps others avoid the same fate.

Olivia Newton-John has shown the advantage of fighting a disease with inner strength and resolve instead of waiting to die. Visualizing herself well again, she survived a radical mastectomy and nine months of chemotherapy. Like others before her, she chose to educate others and raise awareness about the importance of early diagnosis.

Mike Utley and Christopher Reeve both have set an example of the personal progress you can make if you are willing to fight for it. Utley especially shows the contribution a positive attitude makes, starting with the thumbs-up sign he gave while being carried off the field. And both have set up foundations and raised awareness to speed up the pace of the research needed to eliminate paralysis.

Magic Johnson provides living proof that someone with HIV can continue to live fully and contribute much to society instead of just waiting to die. He has raised awareness and acceptance for the condition in a way few others could have done. As popular as he is, people will have to address their personal issues about HIV and may gain more tolerance toward others with this disease.

Ronald Reagan's candor and courage in facing Alzheimer's is helping raise awareness of the disease and providing powerful support for research. Only heart disease, cancer, and strokes kill more Americans per year than Alzheimer's, yet the cause and cure are unknown.

While Muhammad Ali's efforts to improve awareness of and support for Parkinson's disease have been ongoing, Michael J. Fox is just beginning. He only recently realized that talking about it could help him, his family, and others. The best is yet to come.

The survivors of those who have died are equally victimized and courageous. Gene Wilder used almost every avenue imaginable to warn and educate women about ovarian cancer, in an effort to give Gilda's death some meaning. Carroll O'Connor fought drug dealers on a grand scale with the same purpose - that Hugh's death might contribute to the greater good.

Several have been lamented for what they had yet to give to their profession. Yet the ordeals they

now endure make them worthy of respect and love that go beyond their prior record. Not only do they survive, they persevere. Not only do they help themselves, they use their "tragedy" to help others. Through them, we are made to remember and appreciate all that we have in our lives for which to be grateful. They teach us that, in their humanness, they are as vulnerable as you or I to disease and death. And they set an example for us to live by - one of compassion and servitude to others.

These reasons, in their universality and wisdom, offer clear evidence of the answer to "Why?". Because of the contribution to greater good these famed Americans can and do make. And, when they do, they finally become truly larger than life.

"Tragic" Timeline

- 1989 - Gilda Radner, comedienne extraordinaire, falls victim to ovarian cancer. *(1 of 14,000 per year U.S.)*
- 1991 - Mike Utley, a 25-year-old Detroit Lion, breaks his neck during a routine play. *(1 of 250,000 U.S.)*
- 1991 - Magic Johnson finds out he's HIV positive. *(1 of 1 million U.S. and 20 million worldwide)*
- 1991 - Michael Landon, playing an angel, is struck down by pancreatic cancer. *(1 of 29,000 per year U.S.)*
- 1992 - Olivia Newton-John is diagnosed with breast cancer. *(1 of 200,000 per year)*
- 1994 - President Reagan confirms he has Alzheimer's, after surviving multiple cancers. *(1 of 4 million U. S.)*
- 1995 - Christopher Reeve ("Superman") is severely paralyzed in an equestrian accident. *(1 of 250,000+ U.S.)*
- 1995 - Carroll O'Connor's son, Hugh, commits suicide linked to substance abuse. *(1 of 30,000 per year U.S.)*
- 1999 - Michael J. Fox, at 37, announces he has had Parkinson's Disease since 1991. *(1 of 1 million U.S.)*