Paris Hilton and What We Want

Paris Hilton. Paris Hilton. Paris Hilton. Paris Hilton. Paris Hilton.

Please excuse the repetition, but I want this article to score highly in Google searches.

You see, *Google Zeitgeist*, the mega-search engine's report on its most popular search topics, says the heiress scored number one on 2006 Google News searches. The report presents a glimpse of the "spirit of the times," giving clues to websurfers' interests.

In news (yes, I said "news," not "entertainment") searches, Paris beat Orlando Bloom, cancer, and Hurricane Katrina. Borat and Hezbollah topped "Who is" searches. Among U.S. searches for "Scandal," the Duke Lacrosse episode took three of the first four slots.

What else do people want to know about? Google's top-ten lists in various categories include MySpace, Nicole Kidman, Tom Cruise, Britney Spears, Paul McCartney, Pamela Anderson, Reggie Bush, and Clay Aiken.

Why do celebrities and entertainment rank so high? Perhaps it's the desire to connect with something larger than ourselves. Maybe boredom explains some celebrity obsession. And don't rule out diversion.

For some—maybe many—daily life ranges from harried to overwhelming: soured relationships, job conflict, financial pressure, health distress. Diverting focus can ease your troubled mind, at least temporarily.

Of course, everyone needs mental and emotional breaks. Diversion can be a healthy coping mechanism—until it becomes obsessive. Then it can lead to denying reality, perhaps

obscuring genuine wants and needs.

Suppose we had a mind/heart/soul reader to discover what people really want once their basic physical needs are met. What would we find? Psychologist Abraham Maslow's renowned hierarchy of basic needs includes safety, love, esteem and self-actualization.{1} Perhaps our soul reader would detect desires for acceptance, thriving personal friendships, peace of mind, health, security.

Maslow also realized that several profound fears—including the fear of death—trouble humanity.{2} Our soul reader might find that people also want an answer to death.

Anthropologist Ernest Becker argued in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Denial of Death*,{3} that much human behavior can be explained by a deep desire to deny death's reality, to repress "the terror of death." No wonder. Which would you enjoy more, right this minute: contemplating your own death and its aftermath . . . or reading, exercising, web- or channel surfing, conversing, partying, working, shopping, etc.?

If we don't have a solution to fear of death, we can invent ways to avoid thinking about it. Alas, attractive and even worthwhile pursuits can become enslaving. Amassing the most "toys"; rat-race schedules; obsession with career, job, education, sports or even friends can insulate people from facing their own mortality.

The biblical book of Hebrews presents a similar analysis of the human dilemma, reasoning that people "have lived all their lives as slaves to the fear of dying." {4} It claims that Jesus died to "deliver" people from this slavery so they might connect with God in time and eternity.

It seems morbid to always be thinking about your own death. But could avoiding it altogether constitute unhealthy denial? Could excessive focus on certain pursuits become risky

diversion from life's real issues, like personal meaning, personal worth, fulfilling relationships, and what Sigmund Freud called "the painful riddle of death"?{5}

Could obsession with Paris Hilton and her *Google Zeitgeist* pals conceal deep longings, insecurities and fears in individual websurfers and in society at large?

As the esteemed British philosopher and rocker Sir Mick Jagger famously counseled, "You can't always get what you want. But if you try sometime . . . you just might find you get what you need." {6} A friendly question for my fellow websurfers: Is what you want, what you need?

Notes

1. A. H. Maslow (1943), "A Theory of Human Motivation"; Originally Published in *Psychological Review*, 50, 370-396; at http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm, accessed December 28, 2006.
2. Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (Penguin Books Limited, ©1964 by Kappa Delta Pi and ©1970 [preface] The Viking Press), Appendix A, "Religious Aspects of Peak-Experiences," items 8 & 14; at http://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/lsd/maslowa.htm, accessed December 28, 2006.
3. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997; original copyright was 1973).
4. Hebrews 2:15 NLT.
5. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961 edition; James Strachey translator and editor; original work was published in 1928) 19.
6. Mick Jagger and Keith Richards (songwriters), "You Can't Always Get What You Want." Lyrics at http://rollingstones.com/discog/index.php?v=so&a=1&id=124; accessed December 28, 2006.

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