

Liberace's Greatest Disappointment

My first big interview opportunity as a young newspaper reporter less than one year after graduating from college came in early 1962. The Tuesday edition of the *Cookeville Citizen* had just gone to press when the publisher, Coleman Harwell, rushed up to my desk and exclaimed, "Grab your camera and get up to the B & B Restaurant. Someone just called and said Liberace is there having lunch."



So I did. I picked up my camera and half-ran the couple of blocks to the restaurant, which was the gourmet eating establishment of its time, located on the courthouse square. When I hurried through the front door, the star was easy to find. He was seated in a booth, with a crowd – mostly women – gathered around seeking autographs. I introduced myself, told him why I was there, and he invited me to have a seat; we conversed for about an hour. He was en route from Knoxville to Nashville to do a concert in the capital city.

Liberace was dressed informally – not the glitzy attire that was an onstage trademark – and he was pleasant and responsive to questions. He posed for a few pictures, hugged the women, and dashed out the door to head down U.S. Highway 70 to Music City.

Wladziu Valentino Liberace – known to his friends as Lee and to his family as Walter – enjoyed a career as a pianist, singer and actor spanning four decades. At the height of his fame, from the 1950s to the 1970s, Liberace was the highest-paid entertainer in the world, acquiring the nickname *Mr. Showmanship*.

The late Roger Ailes, *Fox News* executive and media consultant to presidents, told an interesting story about the entertainer.

When Liberace was a small boy growing up in Wisconsin, he had to play piano in beer halls to make money. His father was a very stern, somewhat humorless classical musician who insisted that his son become a classical pianist. Liberace reluctantly complied with his father's wishes.

Finally, he was booked to play a classical concert, and his father attended. Liberace performed at his best that night with an unusual flair. When the concert ended, however, and he turned toward his father's seat, hoping to see him beaming with pride, he saw that the seat was empty. His father had walked out of the concert.

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When Liberace arrived home, his father berated him for acting like a clown while performing great musical works. Liberace later said that his father's rejection that night was the greatest disappointment of his life.

That is a sobering story, but ...

Why are so many parents like that? You can see them at Little League games berating a small child for miffing a ground ball. You can hear them in public places dousing a teenager's dreams. Do they really think they are helping?

Love – the kind of love that Jesus taught – is a commandment. It takes many forms. Love is affection. Love is encouragement.

In the *Life Care Journey* sessions I lead, one of the qualities of a servant leader is to recognize the need of their associates for affection; everyone has a sign around his or her neck indicating the desire to be loved. The Bible describes it this way:

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful (1 Corinthians 13:4-5 ESV).



As the popular song written by Jackie DeShannon proclaims: *What the world needs now is love, sweet love ... It's the only thing that there's just too little of ... What the world needs now is love, sweet love ... Not just for some but for everyone.*

– Beecher Hunter