

## Reading

### **American Idol, Wishing, and Life Lessons by Sharon Janis, author of “Spirituality for Dummies”**

*“As I write this, the contestants in season eight of American Idol have been whittled down to the final two: Adam Lambert and Kris Allen. Both are very talented fellows. I would like to see Adam win. Not as much as I wanted to see Barack Obama win, but with the same sense of rightness. Adam’s rendition of Mad World was soul stirring for me, and I love that he relishes his own flamboyant, lovely, wild self, not to mention his amazing vocals. Adam Lambert reminds me of David Bowie, who also pushed past many limits but still remained somehow relatable, relevant, and musically great.*

*My wanting Adam to win brings up an analogous life lesson. Sometimes we want something in life – whether to get the guy or girl, or the job, house, have the child, win the award, and so on. That want for an outer circumstance is like wanting Adam (or Kris) to win – focusing on a specific desire you would like to have fulfilled in a specific way.*

*But if you go deeper, beneath the obvious news headline surface, what is it that you really want? What is it that we really want when hoping for a specific outcome in American Idol, or within any arena of life? We may be praying, affirming, and using various laws of attraction to move the universe into giving us an apparent desired outcome, but really, what we want is deeper than that specific outcome.*

*What we really want if we’re an Adam Lambert fan is for him to be successful, making great music that we’ll be able to enjoy for years to come. In life also, what we really want is often different from the outer potential symptoms of that deeper want. Let’s say you want to get a specific person to fall in love with you, but what you really are looking for is the powerful love that comes from being with the right person. If that specific person is also the right person, well then you’re in luck. But if they’re not, then you may spend all your effort, intention, and energy to create the outer circumstance you want but without the inner happiness you thought would accompany it.*

*You want to get that apartment or house, but what you really want is to be in a place that will give you peace, beauty, safety, and happiness. You pray clear to the bones to get that job, but really, you would be happy to not get it if only you knew of the even greater opportunities waiting beyond that disappointment.*

*So as we watch the upcoming finale, regardless of who we hope will be the American Idol 2009, let’s also use this opportunity to practice keeping a deeper vision to focus on the more essential qualities behind our intentions, wishes, and desires – qualities like happiness, peacefulness, wisdom, service, and love.”*

<http://www.spiritual-happiness.com/labels/american%20idol.html>



## Sermon

One of the things you'll often hear in Unitarian Universalist circles is that we find truth and wisdom in many places. We don't have just one Bible in this religion. We have many. We have the arts and literature and science. Poetry. Theater. Music. Art. And then we have our own experiences. Each of us is a living Bible that evolves our entire lives. We can find sacred meaning in just about anything. In our theology, it's all fair game.

So that means I got to watch American Idol videos on YouTube this week and call it sermon research! There's no reason why we couldn't take a popular reality show like American Idol and look at it as a source of truth and wisdom. How many of you watch American Idol? For those of you who are unfamiliar with the show, talent judges travel around the country auditioning anyone who wants to be America's next rock star. Thirteen contestants get on the show. Every week they sing their hearts out, and viewers vote for their favorite singer by phone and the singer with the least votes goes home. The last one left is that year's American Idol. But the show is about more than singing. All the contestants live in the same house, filled with cameras of course, and you get to see them in their non-singing lives. So when you're voting, you're not just voting for the best singer. You're really voting for a whole package – their singing plus how you think you know them as people.

American Idol has captured millions of hearts. More people watch American Idol than go to church. I would also bet that more people aged 18 to 35 voted in American Idol than in the last election. This show has connected with people at a deep level.

There's no denying that American Idol has a lot of critics. Critics will say that it turns the contestants into a product to be sold to us. It reinforces stereotypes of beauty and gender. It holds fame and popularity as the most important achievements. It shows people who will do just about anything to win. And I kind of agree with them.

Another criticism is that it makes the viewers into sheep, people who will do anything they are told to. It makes us dumb and compliant. And there's probably some truth to that. But I don't know that I buy the whole package. One of the things we know from women's history is that even in the most oppressive of times, women always found ways to put their own mark on the world, and why shouldn't we give the same kind of possibility to people who follow American Idol? I know there are times every one of us has gone along with the crowd. But, you never know what is really going on inside a person, if they're just looking like they're going along with the crowd and still thinking for themselves. You really don't know if American Idol means to them what the creators of American Idol want it to mean. We all have our own way of understanding things. And that's what interests me. I kind of see it the same way I see the Bible. There's no one way to read the Bible. There are so many ways to interpret it.



And I think we can do the same thing with American Idol. I don't think it's worth writing something off because it's got some problems. Yes, there is a manipulative element to American Idol, but that's not all it is because it's about real people – the ones on stage and ones watching it on TV. And somehow, we've got a powerful thing going on. American Idol is a sensation and it just keeps growing.

So I want to know.... What's the big deal? What makes it so meaningful?

I think that American Idol has taken off because it takes the regular stuff of our lives and makes it glamorous. It takes the things we want to be proud of, and the things we're not sure we should be proud of, and puts them up high on a pedestal.

Let me give you an example. We all want approval. We all need approval. We've also been told, usually by parents and teachers, that it shouldn't matter what other people think of us, we are good just as we are. And we're told this to help protect us from the disapproval we are bound to face in our lives, to help us be stronger when we face judgment from others. We all know this to be true, in our heads. But deep in our hearts, I think for more of us than will admit it, it does matter what other people think of us. But having been told that it shouldn't matter, it becomes hard to admit it, because we're afraid it will make us look weak. On American Idol, no one's pretending. Those contestants are seeking approval, just like we seek approval every day of our lives. Every one of us struggles every day to be our true selves, and yet there is always something in us worrying that it won't be o.k., that we won't be accepted. So they're doing on American Idol what we do every day of our lives. They are balancing their real selves with what they think we want them to be so that they can get approval. This is how American Idol takes a normal experience and makes it larger than life and glamorous. And we love it!

But it's more than this. It goes the other way around too. Not only do we want approval, we want other people to care about what we think about them. We want them to need our approval. But who will admit it. "I need you to need me to like you." On American Idol, once again there's no pretending. Our approval matters. The contestants need us to vote for them. Sometimes they beg us to vote for them. So once again, American Idol takes a normal experience - our need for other people to need us - and makes it larger than life and somewhat glamorous. And that is one of the reasons American Idol is so popular. It takes these things we have trouble admitting, and makes them o.k.. I need your approval. I need you to need my approval.

Many cultural studies people say that Americans are the loneliest people in the world. Something about our society creates a lot of isolation and alienation which means that we tend to be more insecure and to think that we



don't matter. We feel not needed. It's one of the reasons so few people aged 18-35 actually vote. They've become cynical about their ability to make a difference. I think the people who created American Idol tapped into that deep insecurity, and found a very creative way to meet that need, even if it's in a shallow way. We all get to vote. We all get to make a difference in a very real way for very real people.

Every one of us experiences times when we feel like we are able to make a difference and other times when it feels like we don't. Sometimes you are able to influence your parents' decisions about you. Sometimes you aren't. All of us have different levels of influence at school, where we work, and with our families. The allure of American Idol is that no one has more power than someone else. All opinions matter equally because we all have one vote.

One of the most important moments in American Idol happens after every song. The contestant stands in front of the judges, who have the kind of influence all of us want on some level. They get to say exactly what they want to that person. Some of the judges, like Paula Abdul, are the kind of judge we like. She loves everyone and can find something good in every performance. She's the one who always cries and says, "Oh my god, that was ... beautiful!" Simon Cowell on the other hand, is the judge everyone is scared of, because he calls it like it is. If someone sucks, he'll say so, and usually not politely. Everyone likes Paula. But I think everyone has respect for Simon because he's the truth teller. And I think most of us want to be truth tellers, and most of us know how hard it can be to do that, especially when you are needing approval or when you're needing to be needed.

There's another reason why Simon is so important. We get to touch our darker sides through him. Every one of us has a critical and judgmental side, and when he lets loose on someone, we get to watch him do what many of would never let ourselves do, either because we worry what people will think of us or we worry that our criticism might hurt someone or because we just know better than to say everything we think because sometimes it really isn't appropriate to say it. So when Simon says what he thinks, we can look shocked, but another part of us is living our unlive d desires through him. This is why we sometimes feel a sense of satisfaction inside when he puts someone on the spot. It's a way to live out stuff we might never do in our real lives and then not have to feel guilty about it. So again, American Idol has taken a real life experience, one that many of us won't admit, and made it kind of glamorous and sexy.

But what makes this different from a regular TV show is that there are real life consequences. Twelve of those people are going home. One will be the winner. Perhaps this is the part of American Idol that is most powerful. Our society is so competitive. American culture has a certain aggressiveness that isn't as prevalent in other countries. And that aggressiveness can sometimes result in a great deal of creativity. But sometimes it becomes



something all on its own. Ambition is admired for its own sake. There is the belief that anyone can make it to the top if they just work hard enough. And even though there is a lot of evidence to show that's not true for everyone, there are just enough examples out there to make it seem like it could be true for everyone. Those contestants, no matter how friendly they are to each other, are competing with each other, and there's only going to be one winner. The rules of the game are that one person goes home every week, so every week we say good bye to someone. And in an individualistic culture, those goodbyes are seen as normal. It's o.k. for some to move on ahead and for others to be left behind. In fact, in an individualistic world view, it's absolutely moral that some are left behind and others go on ahead.

And despite the fact that I enjoy American, this is what I struggle with in American Idol. Because we have seen what the larger results are of this mindset. There is a connection between our fascination with win/lose situations, and the fact that we have the highest poverty rate among rich nations. There is a connection between the rules of American Idol and the truth that millions in this country do not have health insurance, and that we have a tax system that ensures middle class kids have good schools, and shrugs its shoulders if poor kids can't even get textbooks. In this way of thinking, someone has to get left behind. You only get ahead by making sure others lose. We can't all win because there isn't enough to go around.

In Unitarian Universalism we affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence. Everything is connected, including the reality of life in our country and what entertains us. It's all connected to a similar set of values. The thing is, in our faith, we are told to ask a lot of questions. Like, how does this interdependent web affect those people who have the least power? What is it telling me about my self worth and how I should be in relationship with other people?

So what's the theology of American Idol? We all need approval. We need to be needed. There is value in truth telling. Everyone has one vote. There isn't enough for everyone. Competition is a valid way of measuring someone's worth. Like any theology, there is some stuff here that is true and some that isn't. And that's why American Idol is like the Bible, because there isn't only one way to read it. There isn't only one truth.

There's nothing wrong with enjoying American Idol. I had a great week researching this sermon. But it's important to keep your eyes open and your mind engaged because there are messages in everything about human value and dignity, if you choose to look for those messages.



"The Theology of American Idol"

Rev. Krista Taves

September 27, 2009

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

I have a challenge for you. Take your favorite show and instead of just watching it, look at it as if it is another Bible. What values do you see that you agree with? What values do you see that you don't? And then I want you to consider dropping me an email letting me know what you found. And some of them will find their way into articles in This Week At Emerson, our weekly newsletter. And all of them will find their way into a binder that I'll leave by the bulletin board so we can all see what we've found. And what we'll be doing is theology. Finding truth and meaning in the things we give our time to. This is my challenge to you. May it be so.