

From shame to fame

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [July 26, 2011](#) issue



An image of Lady Gaga made from screenshots of her videos by one of her many fans. [AttributionShare Alike Some rights reserved](#) by [qthomasbower](#).

Stefani Germanotta was an awkward teenager, at least as she remembers it. Her peers bullied her for being ugly, for having a big nose and giant eyebrows. They teased her for her laugh, for her love of theater, for her penchant for constantly singing, for the way she wore her makeup. They made fun of her tan and her hairdo. "I used to be called a slut, be called this, be called that. I didn't even want to go to school sometimes," she says.

Now Stefani Germanotta is world-famous as Lady Gaga. Her shows are filled with memorable theatrics—brassieres that shoot sparks, dresses made of meat, intricately choreographed dances, lots of fake blood and real fire. These concerts are among the most popular in music today, and her television performances are eagerly awaited as viewers wonder what she'll come up with next. (This year at the Grammys she was carried onstage in and emerged from a giant egg.)

Despite the stratospheric levels of her success, she hasn't forgotten being a misfit. "It wasn't until I put my music out into the world that I was able to look into myself and honor my own misfit and honor the reality of how I was treated when I was a kid, not by my family, but by my peers in school, and how it affected me."

Consequently, Lady Gaga's message to her devoted fans is that it is all right for them to be "little monsters." Others may regard them as too fat or too skinny, or

harass them because they are gay or otherwise different. But as their Mother Monster, she reminds them that they have real worth. In concerts she tells them she was (and is) a misfit, but look at her now. She promises them that they, too, may one day stand on a stage at Madison Square Garden and soak in lapping waves of applause. She shares her fame and herself with them—Lady Gaga is always "on" for her public—and regards her fans as "at least 50 percent, if not more," of her person.

In turn her fans not only adore her but begin to respect themselves. A 15-year-old boy writes representatively, "I am an extremely devoted little monster, and I'll be a little monster for life. . . . At every concert you've said that you want to liberate us, and that is what you've done. Your songs have taught me not to listen to haters and be who I am, because, baby, I was born this way!"

It is not too much to say that Lady Gaga has a mission of liberating her fans, or that she ministers to them in her flamboyant, over-the-top way. In fact, Gaga's message resonates with the gospel. To paraphrase Will Campbell, the gospel message is that "we're all misfits, but God loves us anyway."

Particularly in the church's youth ministry, it seems as if the strategy is often to reach out to the most beautiful and successful, to recruit the winners and then let all the (relative) losers follow them into the group. Maybe this strategy "works," but Lady Gaga is a reminder that there is an alternative.

Lady Gaga is a Kierkegaard in fishnet stockings, who can play piano and guitar. Whether she intends to or not (and however sacrilegious such songs as her "Judas" may appear), Lady Gaga reminds us that Jesus came among us as a misfit, born into a feed trough. He lived itinerantly, with no real home or place to lay his head. He was an outcast who recruited rough-hewn fishermen and despicable tax collectors as his followers. And finally he ended up beside the most despised of the despised, crucified naked on a humiliating Roman cross. Suffice to say he surely was not voted "most likely to succeed" in his high school.

The strict dictionary definition of *monster* is something or someone who "deviates markedly from the normal type." In this sense Jesus Christ was a monster, right down to the orthodox confession of him as both "very God" and "very man." A king who rode a donkey, a savior who died, he overturns our ordinary, ideal definitions of divinity and humanity. We can even add that he was given to theatrics, such as pulling coins out of fishes' mouths, walking on water and driving moneychangers out

of the temple.

Kierkegaard was at pains to defeat all prettification and accommodation of the gospel, to remind those who would call themselves Christian that Jesus when he lived on this earth was widely despised and rejected, treated like a monster. And if that Jesus is the Jesus who calls us to be like him, even to be a part of his body, then Christians are the original little monsters. Lady Gaga is playing a variation on an old song.