

Worshipping at the church of Taylor

The goodness of a Taylor Swift show points to our need for a deeper goodness.

by [Amy Julia Becker](#) in the [January 2024](#) issue

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Taylor Swift performs in May 2023 during the Eras Tour at Lincoln Financial Field in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (Lisa Lake / TAS23 / Getty Images)

Taylor Swift more or less plays on repeat when I'm driving around with our kids, so the recent arrival of *The Eras Tour* film, a new version of "Cruel Summer," and *1989 (Taylor's Version)* all generated great excitement in our household. I'm a fan, but I'm also trying to understand. Why, exactly, is Taylor Swift so popular?

I asked the six teenagers in our minivan this question before we dropped them off to enjoy the *Eras* movie. (My husband, Peter, and I went for a walk. Our family had the concert experience of a lifetime back in May, and I had no need to relive it.)

The kids said they love Swift because she's authentic, creative, relatable. That she cares about how she is seen by others but doesn't care enough to back down from what she really believes. She seems very *real*. Taffy Brodesser-Akner offered a different take in the *New York Times*, which is that Swift allows girls and women to experience every era of their lives without cringing. She helps us receive the sad and embarrassing and romantic and immature and sincere moments all as a part of what makes us who we are, and therefore worthy of remembering and celebrating.

All of these answers make sense to me. And yet there is also an undercurrent—or perhaps an overcurrent—of adulation, one that at first seems incongruous with the aw-shucks, relatable, every-girl Taylor.

Our family walked into Gillette Stadium in Massachusetts last spring for one of the most memorable shows of the Eras Tour. As fate would have it, we had procured tickets to one of Swift's legendary "rain shows." For the uninitiated, as I was, it is desirable to see Taylor Swift perform in the rain, because she refuses to let the elements get in the way of the entertainment. Somehow she made us all feel—all 70,000 of us—that we were hanging out with her as she showed us a few things she'd been working on. In a torrential downpour. Rain can't stop her from dancing, and it can't stop her fans from celebrating.

As soon as we arrived at the show, Peter and I were both struck by the sense of being in a house of worship. The rituals, the chants, the ecstatic moments, the shared experience, even the reciprocal relationships established through friendship bracelets—it all underscored a sense of awe and transcendence alongside intimacy. People are notably kind to one another at a Taylor Swift show. At Gillette Stadium, even the security guards were smiling widely and dancing in the aisles. Because our oldest daughter has Down syndrome, we were able to stand throughout the show in a section specifically set aside for people with disabilities. It felt holy to stand among other disabled people, watching sign language interpreters and dancing alongside a woman in a wheelchair. The title of Jessica Winter's recent piece for *The New Yorker* sums it up well: "Bearing Witness with My Daughter at the Church of Taylor Swift."

Among the many celebrities our kids could try to emulate, I'm glad they have turned to Swift. She seems to care about people. She seems honest in the way she portrays herself. She writes compelling lyrics about betrayal and heartache and awkwardness and hurt.

And yet I also suspect that even this billionaire, multi-Grammy-winning superstar herself cannot satisfy my children's deepest longings. As sincere as she might be, Taylor Swift is also a pop star. By definition, her job is to keep our longings on the surface and satisfy them there.

In *Everything Belongs*, Richard Rohr writes about the dangers of living too much on the surface of our existence. "We are a circumference people, with little access to the center," he writes. "We live on the boundaries of our own lives . . . confusing edges with essence, too quickly claiming the superficial as substance." Rohr goes on to explain that the circumferences of our lives aren't in and of themselves bad. We don't need to moralize and stand in judgment of them. And yet if we stay at the circumferences, we get stuck there, and we never encounter the deeper realities of suffering and joy and pain and love.

The church of Taylor Swift is a church of the circumference. Rohr describes the circumference as "passing, accidental, sometimes illusory." Necessitating a trip to Party City or an order of plastic rhinestone stickers from Amazon to participate. Creating a sense of connection that dissipates as soon as the fireworks end. There's a part of me that wants to reject Rohr's advice and moralize about the consumerism and ephemerality of it all. There's another part of me that wants to critique our churches for not offering more of a sense of understanding and intimacy to teenagers and adults alike.

And there's a part of me that wonders whether the church of Taylor Swift could be a waystation for my kids' generation. Swift's concerts offer a place where we can tap into deep human longings for both transcendence and intimacy, for celebration of our glorious selves and absolution of our worst parts, for belonging to one another across all sorts of divides.

The goodness of a Taylor Swift show points to our need for a deeper goodness. We are a lonely people in need of connection that goes deeper than friendship bracelets exchanged with strangers. We are a people in need of permission to mourn losses and celebrate beauty for longer than a few hours on a Saturday night. We are

taught—by our culture, and also by Swift herself—to believe in karma, but we are in need of blessing. Our souls crave the assurance that we will not be measured by our rights and wrongs but instead will be received in love by a God of grace.

The church has not been able to compete with Taylor Swift. But maybe, once the tour is over and the music fades, some of those people will find their way to a smaller and quieter setting with the same invitation to friendship and belonging and intimate connection. Maybe Swift is just one more step on a road away from sanctuaries of grace. Or maybe she is a sign that points to our need for them.