

“Hero Widow”: The Making of Lisa Beamer’s 9/11 Celebrity

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“You’ve become it,” Larry King advised the woman he was hosting on his nationally syndicated talk show, for the seventh time in six months. Seconding the opinion of a caller who had referred to her as “the spokesperson across America for all the World Trade Center [...] and plane victims,” King would permit no polite demurrals from his guest: “By choice or not, you’re it” (*Larry King Live*, 22 Feb. 2002). “It” by that moment, early in 2002, Lisa Beamer surely had become: if not exactly the “spokesperson,” the preeminent witness to the trauma of 9/11 and the event’s most widely recognized celebrity. Wife of the man whose call “Let’s roll!” helped rally fellow passengers to action on a hijacked flight above Pennsylvania, five months pregnant at the time of her loss, Beamer came to be known as the “hero widow.”

- 1 In this guise, she was “everywhere” in the media following the attacks, making over 200 appearances in the first six months alone (“Iconic”). *People* magazine named her one of the “25 Most Intriguing People of 2001” (“Widow’s Profile”). *Newsweek* ranked her equally “central to the post-9-11 world” as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the National Security Advisor, and the president of Pakistan (Thomas). The President of the United States, meanwhile, lauded her before a joint session of Congress and invited her with her family for visits at the White House. The eventual birth of daughter Morgan Kay became a “media event rivaling little Ricky’s arrival on *I Love Lucy*” (Faludi 100). A memoir completed in time for the first anniversary of 9/11 shot to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list, adding to her draw as “one of the most sought-after interviews on the planet” (Beamer).
- 2 The discussion that follows seeks to understand this spectacular ascent to public prominence, the making of Lisa Beamer’s 9/11 celebrity. While that celebrity matched in some respects the type that has been called “accidental”—the ordinary person propelled by force of circumstances into the public eye (Turner, Bonner, and Marshall 110–14)—this essay will argue that it resulted from a broader, multidimensional process. The most useful framework for comprehending this process is to be found in P. David Marshall’s seminal work, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*. Marshall construes celebrity status as the product of an interactive “negotiation” among three parties: the media, the audience, and the individual (xlix, 12). This scheme guides the three-part organization of the analysis to be presented here. It also indicates why the inquiry needs to be interdisciplinary in nature and points to the specific fields that will come into play.
- 3 The first of these, in order of precedence, is celebrity studies: the burgeoning scholarly discipline that has arisen to address what has arguably become a central phenomenon of modern life (Colvin vii). Another, corresponding to the first-mentioned partner in the negotiation scheme, is media studies. The factor of audience, whose predilections in the matter of celebrity are susceptible to the broad influences of culture, invites the approaches of cultural and specifically American Studies. Finally, Marshall’s insistence that the individual aspirant to celebrity status, the “living, breathing human being” (3), plays a role in the negotiation process, suggests the relevance of psychological perspectives, the utility of “dig[g]ing into the self’s interior,” as Joshua Gamson puts it (*Claims to Fame* 19), in order to understand a given celebrity experience.
- 4 This leaves one final introductory note. The story of Lisa Beamer’s 9/11 celebrity continues on from its making to an equally rapid unmaking. Any assessment of overall significance must await consideration of the full arc of her experience. That much acknowledged, however, the genesis of her fame stands as a subject in its own right. It constitutes a chapter in the larger history of American reckoning with 9/11, and it offers reciprocal contributions to the fields brought to bear on its understanding. The task now is to

reconstruct the process through which the complex construction that Larry King heralded as “it” took shape.

Media

- 5 Media enterprises have a vested interest in celebrities because celebrities have proven a reliable means of attracting and holding audiences. Accordingly, efforts are regularly made either to seek out figures with whom audiences are already enamored or to identify and cultivate newcomers capable of generating this drawing power. The later portion of Lisa Beamer’s time in the public eye, when landing “one of the most sought-after interviews on the planet” garnered the highest Nielsen ratings ever received by *Dateline NBC* (Maryles and Donahue), provides ample demonstration of the first of these two strategies. This section of the essay follows her early progress, when she was the subject of selection and cultivation efforts. The analysis will focus on a specific medium and genre, the television news talk show, and ultimately on a specific vehicle, *Larry King Live*, through which Beamer’s celebrity primarily evolved.

“Expert...[in] the pain of losing a loved one”

- 6 A surge in competition dating from the late 1990’s among cable news talk shows, intensified by the impact of 9/11, provided an initial context for the hero-widow’s rise to prominence. As viewers tuned in to this type of programming in record numbers, a new class of “expert” guests, victims’ family members—the “only sources,” according to one producer, “knowledgeable about the pain of losing a loved one” (Rutenberg)—came to be at a premium, prompting a scramble on the part of the different shows to identify and recruit more like them. Thirteen such figures made appearances on *Larry King Live* alone in first few weeks following the attacks. Soon, by a further competitive dynamic, a “handful of the bereaved,” Lisa Beamer among them, came to be selected out for repeat appearances, and to achieve a degree of familiarity and even name recognition within the viewing public (Rutenberg).

Medium, genre, and evolving styles of celebrity

- 7 What made these mourners’ testimony so riveting, allowing them to eclipse the conventional talk-show roster of officials and analysts in the search for ratings-generating 9/11 personalities, owed in part to an audience factor, the “culture of grief,” that will be taken up in the next section. But deeper parameters of the television medium and the talk-show genre, together with related developments in the constitution of celebrity, also had a bearing. Unlike the film star of an earlier era, according to Marshall, whose aura of celebrity was created through the “construction of distance” (81) the high-profile television performer, in particular for him the talk-show host, is “configured around conceptions of familiarity,” even “familiality” (119) and “mass acceptability” (121). No other kind of celebrity better exemplifies the dual status for which he has coined the term “audience-subject”: a figure who, no matter how distinguished by extraordinary talent or experience, at the same time embodies the ordinary individuality of the public audience (51–55). No other perhaps until, just beyond the chronological horizon of Marshall’s original study, has come the advent of the “democratic celebrity” (Currid-Halkett 194, 213), the phenomenon of “ordinary people” (Turner) “bypassing the conventional conditions of entry” to fame (Gamson, “Unwatched Life” 1061). This latest evolutionary phase has allowed the role of “audience-subject” to be played in certain instances as well by the talk-show guest, typically possessing even more palpable ties to the mass public.
- 8 In addition to explaining the prominence of a “handful of the bereaved” in the post-9/11 media landscape, these considerations point up Lisa Beamer’s preeminence even within this select group (Rutenberg). For she possessed the qualities of “familiarity,” inoffensiveness or “mass acceptability,” and all-around ordinariness, in full measure. Journalist Bill Duryea, the most thoughtful contemporary observer of Beamer’s fame, attested to these attributes and their effect in inclining members of the public to see her as one of them, in effect an “audience-subject.” Reporting on a book-signing event for her newly released memoir, Duryea spoke to the feeling of vicarious but intense familiarity, verging into familiality,

that the young widow inspired: “each person [in line for a signature] prepared to speak to the woman they think of as family but have never met.” He also offered the reflection that “ordinariness,” supplemented by blandness, was this celebrity’s “strong suit.” “Call any random number in the phone book,” he wrote, ask the questions Larry King would typically put to her in an interview, and the “answers might be the same [...] utterly banal [...] completely reassuring. What she thought about the war in Afghanistan was not so important as the minutiae of her life in suburbia.” The subject of this attention also testified to this peculiarity of it, remarking at one point in the memoir: “The next morning I was a guest on *Good Morning America* again. It was crazy! And you want my opinion? I thought. It’s just me! I’m a mom and a housewife from a small town in New Jersey” (251). But it was “just me” whose opinion (or “minutiae”) the media very much wanted, on behalf of the large number of “just them” in the audience.

Specifics: guest and host

- 9 Still, others being showcased at this time, including the thirteen who made it to *Larry King Live*, more or less ran the gamut of post-9/11 talk-show credentials. Factors specific to Beamer herself and/or to her host’s appraisal of her must have entered into her selection as his featured guest and, largely from the competitive strength of the program (Timberg 163), to her elevation as the event’s signature witness.
- 10 One of these factors appears to have been the narrative that initially brought this mourner to public attention, to which King’s seasoned journalistic instincts responded eagerly. “What a story!” he exclaimed when learning of Todd Beamer’s words and actions on the doomed flight, as reported by air phone operator Lisa Jefferson (18 Sept. 2001). As it happened, the story contained a potentially troubling wrinkle: in speaking with the operator, the husband had deliberately chosen not to contact his wife. Nevertheless, King found it endlessly compelling, asking for it to be repeated in nearly every one of Beamer’s subsequent appearances on *LKL*.
- 11 What secondly impressed him seems to have been her manner of telling the story, and of responding to his queries generally. Beamer’s ease in front of the camera, and a readiness with words no matter the question that even her harshest critic acknowledged (Perry), seem to have triggered her host’s professional regard and signaled him that this was someone with whom he could work. In this light, the quick banishment from the show of another early guest is instructive. A Ms. Kelly Lee had found herself widowed on September 11 and a new mother on September 12. Yet when asked to reflect on her affecting circumstances, Lee struggled to answer.

King: [after having asked to see the baby] So in a sense you’re sharing this aren’t you?

Kelly Lee: Yeah, I—I just recently realized that other people are—I just couldn’t get past my own. [...]

King: Thank you [...] for coming by. (17 Sept. 2001)

The very next night, Lisa Beamer’s testimony, rolling out in fully formed paragraphs, elicited the “hope to see you again soon” (18 Sept. 2001).

Audience

- 12 Another set of hands active in the making of celebrity belongs to the audience, which in Marshall’s model “is central in sustaining the power of any celebrity” (65). At one further remove, that power, which Marshall understands as primarily “affective” (emotional or charismatic as opposed to rational, in Weberian terms), derives from the culture that members of the audience share, and share with the celebrity or “audience-subject.”

Grief

- 13 One cultural factor at work in Lisa Beamer's case directly frames the "affective power" that attached to her widowhood. According to Carolyn Kitch and Janice Hume, a "culture of grief" had been in process of formation in the US for at least two decades prior to 9/11, going back to the opening of the Vietnam War Memorial (vii). In the interval, Americans became increasingly open about mourning, ready to attach value to and find community in it. Certainly the existence of such a culture helps to explain why the grieving family members proved to be the major drawing card in talk TV's competition for audiences. What's more, the authors go on to note that "Sometimes grief coverage focuses on ordinary people who strike some symbolic nerve—whose lives are seen as especially admirable [...] or whose circumstances are understood as the sort of challenge that brings out the best in us" (xxii). It was by striking just such a "symbolic nerve" that the otherwise ordinary Lisa Beamer came to the fore among the "handful of the bereaved" initially selected (Rutenberg).

Heroism

- 14 Now while the culture, aided by the distant (and un-ordinary) precedent of Jackie Kennedy, created the role of First Mourner for Beamer to occupy, and while the audience, in keeping with the Kitch and Hume thesis, apparently hungered to share her grief, Americans wanted and needed more than a widow; they were also in the market for a hero. The cultural distance between these two roles deserves to be marked. Traditionally, according to historian Ann Douglas, the widow has been regarded as the "emblem of frailty and unproductivity...obligated to undertake nothing but the heavily self-involved business of mourning...[with] no communal tasks deemed appropriate to her widowed state" (59). At least a vestige of this conception must have held sway with a pundit who, envisioning a roster of possible heroes to emerge from 9/11, said nothing about widows, even though his article appeared well after a number of high-impact appearances by Lisa Beamer and other bereaved women (Cannon).
- 15 That such a prediction came forth at all attests in addition to the intensity of the contemporary demand for heroism. In fact, that demand predated 9/11. A Harris Poll taken in the summer of 2001 showed that over half of all Americans could not name a public figure they would regard as heroic, leading a journalist reporting on the finding to remonstrate, "We need living heroes" (Clark 129). The need spiked with the attacks, which caught the nation flat-footed and seemed initially to leave a plenitude of victims and a dearth of figures who had stood up against the onslaught. But from this momentary prostration there ensued a determined search for instances of bravery, in which, among other candidates, Todd Beamer and his compatriots who caused United Flight 93 to crash in a field in Shanksville, PA, represented a prize find.
- 16 It was under these auspices that Lisa Beamer first entered public attention, to be sure not on her own account but as the address on a card from an early well-wisher read, "Lisa, hero Todd's wife" (Thomas). These are almost exactly the terms President Bush used on September 20 to introduce Beamer to the Houses of Congress ("Transcript"), and likewise the way Larry King had announced her first appearance on his show a couple of days earlier. The initial portion of King's interview focused squarely on Todd's story and the already famous rallying cry. But as the segment went on the host began to offer compliments on his guest's composure and her "courage." This led to the surmise that her appearance had "given a lot of hope to a lot of people" and to the eventual wish to have her back on the show soon.
- 17 At the Joint Session a similar but even more dramatic swing in perception occurred. After the president's wife-of-the-hero introduction, the attention of the assembled lawmakers, and of the network TV cameras, turned to the figure of the widow seated in the balcony.
- 18 A reporter in attendance captured the moment, which played out in two beats. The first "could have been a cue for a massive outpouring of emotion." Evidently it seemed as if a pent-up culture of grief was about to break over the scene. What next transpired, though, did not fulfill the expectation: "Mrs. Beamer remained utterly composed as she received a standing ovation" ("Lisa Beamer"). Here the composure that was to become her signature as a 9/11 witness conveyed not only dignity in mourning but a

conspicuous strength that, together with “courage,” is one of the principal attributes of heroism. *People*, in its December selection of her as one of the year’s most intriguing personalities, picked up on the same subtle transformation and articulated it in more sweeping terms. A citation headed “Profile in Courage” noted that the young widow and her situation made for a “poignant description of vulnerability,” but marveled that she had proved herself to be something of the opposite: “Instead of crumbling she has emerged as a symbol of national strength” (“Widow’s Profile”).

- 19 This distinctive joint persona, widow and hero, came literally into focus in the October 2001 photo exhibit, and subsequent book, *Faces of Ground Zero*, by *Life* magazine photographer Joe McNally. Lisa Beamer appears somewhat incongruous in this company, having never been near Ground Zero, and not wearing a uniform or carrying any specialized gear, like the many recovery and demolition workers featured. But within McNally’s larger purpose, of capturing the “*Heroes of September 11* [...] [who] lived through” the event—“living heroes,” in other words, a criterion not even the valiant of Shanksville could fulfill—she assumes what seems a rightful place. In the text devoted to her, the narrative is Todd’s story, but the exhortation, urging Americans to turn “despair... into hope” (85), comes in her words.
- 20 And the pose struck for the photo is pure hero widow, a balance of vulnerability and strength: the hair is slightly disheveled, the lips just short of a tremble, and the hands clasped over a subtle yet unmistakable pregnancy; but the posture is erect and the lifted eyes are focused firmly on the future.

Traditional Femininity

- 21 As Beamer’s fame crested, a blog post appeared offering an alternative explanation of her “affective power.” The anonymous author, concerned with the workings of rhetoric in public communication, contended it was her pregnancy that distinguished her from other “sympathetic characters” on the post-9/11 stage and “gave her an in with the American people.” She was dubbed “Lisa Beamer, Pregnant Rhetorician” (Losh). Whether managed with deliberate persuasive intent or not, this condition did pluck a “sympathetic” string of popular response (a response Joe McNally played on in composing his image of the hero widow). Yet resonant as it proved, the pregnancy represented only one note in a more complex chord of traditional femininity that constitutes a third audience and/or cultural context for Beamer’s celebrity.
- 22 At the time of the attacks, Beamer was not only expecting but already the stay-at-home mother of two young boys. She had been employed: a newspaper report post-9/11 characterized her and her husband as “rising stars at Oracle Corp,” the giant computing firm (qtd. in Faludi 97). But in her memoir she writes of her own position as a “job,” selling educational services, while Todd pursued a “career” swinging big deals for the company’s feature software products (99). In any case, she had readily given up the business world in order to raise the children: “the most important career I could ever have!” (112) To round out the picture of domestic contentment, when she learned that husband Todd had declined an offer for his call from Flight 93 to be put through to her, and held his final conversation with the air phone operator instead, Beamer was neither “offended [n]or hurt.” Taking it that he feared she, in her pregnant state, might become too emotional, she credited him for, “in the only way he could...still looking out for me, protecting me, even in such awful circumstances” (Beamer and Abraham 202).
- 23 But questions arise here regarding the celebrity negotiation. The audience, in Marshall’s conception, needs to recognize itself, no matter how magnified, in the celebrated image, the “audience-subject.” How would Beamer’s role choices have gone over with a public in which, as of 2001, 64% of married women with children under 6 participated in the labor force, and only 19% of all families featured a sole male breadwinner (Bianchi 15; “Employment Characteristics”)? And how would her stay-at-home, grateful-for-protection spirit have fared in a post-*Thelma and Louise* culture, with women striking off on adventurous paths and discovering their own agency seemingly the narrative of the day?
- 24 The answer, according to one commentator on America in the wake of 9/11, is very well indeed. In *The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America*, Susan Faludi posits a national myth of heroic males and fragile, imperiled females, which serves as a kind of default program for gender relations in

times of crisis, generating an ideal of “redomesticated femininity” (3). For this ideal, according to Faludi, Lisa Beamer served as unofficial poster mother. Further, while Faludi’s strictures are aimed primarily at the media’s process of selecting celebrities, a factor of audience arising more or less contemporaneously with the 9/11 crisis may have worked to favor receptivity also at that level. According to research assembled in Sheryl Sandberg’s recent manifesto on gender and career, *Lean In*, the so-called “power mom” or “opt-out” phenomenon, in which “highly trained women are scaling back and dropping out of the workforce in high numbers” (14), appeared as early as 1997, grew markedly from 1999–2002 (the interval in which Beamer made her own opt-out), and has continued apace. In all likelihood, this niche of neo-domesticity corresponded to an audience segment especially attuned to Beamer’s celebrity persona.

Individual

- 25 When he announced that his by then regular guest had become “it,” 9/11’s first celebrity, Larry King added, “whether by choice or not.” Certainly force of circumstances and a host of audience and media factors, including King’s own patronage, conspired to lift Lisa Beamer to this prominence. But the individual, according to Marshall, is not only an “it” but a “being,” and an active player in the negotiation process. To what extent did this individual take a hand in the making of her own celebrity?
- 26 The conventional wisdom at the time saw little that was of her doing. Beamer was the “Reluctant Celebrity,” pitched onto the public stage by the death of her husband, a “horrible way to become a celebrity” (Struck). Beamer herself fostered this consensus. She reported saying no to “most opportunities” presented to her, for interviews, appearances, speaking engagements, and the like, in order to concentrate on her “full-time” job at home (*Larry King Live*, 24 Dec. 2001). When not appearing on TV, “I’m pretty much a normal person [...] Go to Target” (*Larry King Live*, 22 Feb. 2002) and “maintain a constant presence for the [children]” (“Personal Story”). However, looking behind statements to actions, there is evidence for, if no single determining “choice,” then a number of specific volitions suggesting something other than reluctance on Beamer’s part. That she turned down most invitations does not gainsay her accepting 200 over a six-month period. What’s more, this statistic was supplied to the press by a professional publicist retained by Beamer (Duryea), signaling an intention not only to manage but to maximize her public career.
- 27 In spite of the circumstances that opened the way to it, then, it does not appear that in the early going Beamer regarded celebrity itself as a “horrible” fate. While attainment of the status depended in part on variables that she could not fully control or predict, she was willing to become a player in the negotiation process with the other parties. In short, this is something the young widow wanted, albeit in a complex way, at varying levels of intentionality and perhaps from different parts of her “being.” Thus, analysis of the part played by the individual in this celebrity negotiation may also afford glimpses of the psychological terrain characterized by Gamson as the “self’s interior.”

Heroism

- 28 The hero widow did not emerge solely out of the public’s need for post-9/11 strength or out of the media’s interest in supplying that need, but also because the individual behind this image proved willing to assist the process by which it crystallized. It’s true that at first she reacted to opportunities for recognition along this line diffidently, acutely aware of her husband’s heroic standing. Following the president’s September speech to Congress, which he had kicked off by lauding Todd’s action and acknowledging her presence—leading to that moment of dramatically held composure—she was surprised to hear applause rippling up from the floor of the chamber:

I peered over the balcony railing and there...were dozens of congressmen and congresswomen, clapping their hands and looking up...at me! [ellipsis in original]

I realized it was their way of expressing their heartfelt gratitude for what Todd and the

other passengers had done. (Beamer)

This was very much the way of things in the early going: Lisa, introduced as the wife of an “extraordinary man” (“Transcript”), quickly, if not quite instantaneously, deferring to his glory.

29 Still, even before this event, in her first appearance with Larry King, although she had been billed in this fashion and spoke mainly of Todd’s life and accomplishments, it was she who eventually drew the accolade “extraordinary” and the credit for “giving a lot of people a lot of hope” (*Larry King Live*, 18 Sep. 2001). Over time the focus of public attention shifted more and more to the widow (without ever entirely leaving the husband), and the aura of heroism brightened around her. The best evidence of Beamer’s own hand in the casting of this aura comes from the curious episode of the “completion” of Flight 93. A mid-October plan to fly to the West Coast to seek support from Oracle executives for a foundation to be established in Todd’s name drew media attention for two reasons: a) this was a time when airline service had not been fully restored, and many Americans were still afraid to fly; b) the flight itself was the first one of the day out of Newark for San Francisco, the exact itinerary of the former Flight 93. The headline all but wrote itself: “Widow to Complete Hero’s Flight.” In the memoir Beamer disclaims any intentions of a grandstanding “gimmick.” She considered foregoing the journey or changing the flight, “to avoid all the melodrama.” But then, recalling President Bush’s recent injunction to Americans to get life back to normal, she made her resolve: “To cancel the trip”—the alternative of rescheduling having apparently dropped out of consideration—“would be handing a victory to the terrorists who had attacked our country” (264).

30 A “melodrama,” that is to say a media circus, ensued. In San Francisco, the news crews were outnumbered by a large contingent of United Airlines employees, applauding as she arrived at the gate. “At first I thought they were simply acknowledging Todd’s part in preventing Flight 93 from hitting Washington”—a familiar reflex—“but then I realized the wider picture.” In this picture space did not need to be surrendered to or even shared with her husband’s legacy. Her deed took front and center: “The idea was, ‘If Lisa Beamer isn’t afraid to fly on our airline, you can trust us, too’” (270). What’s more, the response of the larger public, once accounts of the flight became news (Belkin), paralleled that of the United audience and provided further validation:

Beyond that, the country’s response was overwhelming. Although I hadn’t considered my actions brave, others did. I guess it encouraged people to be reminded...that even though the terrorists had taken much from us, we still had strength and resolve to conquer our fears and reestablish our lives. That much of the melodrama was true. (Beamer and Abraham 270)

There may never have been two Beamer “rising stars” at Oracle; but two 9/11 heroes were to ascend from within the family. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Lisa Beamer promoted the second apotheosis as well as the first.

Agency

31 Two themes from this pursuit of heroism, independent action and equality of status, carried over into a second self-directed impetus toward celebrity. This was female agency, defined by historian Carol Berkin as a “discovered capacity for autonomy...and competence” beyond the limits allotted within the traditional feminine role (168). The connection may seem incongruous given the portrait of “redomesticated femininity” sketched out for Beamer when explaining her audience appeal. But focusing now on the individual, and once again more on her actions than her “mom and housewife” pronouncements, reveals that the move into public visibility entailed precisely the kind of discovery to which Berkin refers. Beamer’s celebrity journey carried her far, and some of the distance lay along the path blazed by her unlikely cultural sisters, Thelma and Louise.

- 32 From the memoir we learn that in the past of this “power mom,” cheerfully relinquishing the world of work for childrearing, lay a driven young woman. “Extremely career-oriented” (77) is how she characterizes herself in college. She broke off an engagement, shortly after graduation, because she “wanted to succeed on my own first and prove that I could take care of myself” (85). That determination, however, did not survive her crossing paths with Todd Beamer, a hard-charging young man for whom “Let’s roll!” was not so much a chance phrase as a personal credo. Lisa’s retirement from Oracle after the birth of their second child in 1999 was part of a mutually agreed-upon game plan.
- 33 But when what no game plan could predict happened, taking her husband out of her life, the opportunity arose to reactivate that earlier self. It came in the form of an invitation to be interviewed by a Philadelphia TV station, several days after Flight 93 had gone down in western Pennsylvania. This was not the business world for which she had trained, and at first she quailed before the challenge: “I thought, What am I doing? I didn’t know anything about dealing with the media. I’d never done major press interviews in my life! I didn’t have anyone coaching me as to what I should say or not say” (221). Yet Beamer nerved up, went on, and apparently acquitted herself well in this debut, to judge by the flurry of invitations from the national media that immediately followed. These she seized with a will, any doubts about her ability to handle herself in this type of situation put behind. Returning from Pennsylvania to her home in New Jersey at 2:30 a.m., she and other family members repacked and made New York by 4:00 to be ready for a round of spots on the network morning shows (234–35). “Let’s roll” is an apt mantra for the schedule that continued at much this pace over the next months.
- 34 The momentum of this activity carried her across boundaries. Like her cinematic predecessors in role transcendence, albeit minus their turquoise convertible, the young widow entered into a new world of possibilities, far from the familiar round of household duties. Here, to all intents and purposes, was a second chance to “succeed on her own”—and perhaps also, although she never said so directly, to exhibit the confidence her husband had lacked in her at the moment of crisis.
- 35 Of course, unlike Thelma and Louise, Beamer was headed not into the wide open spaces of the West but the densely structured environment of the City, looking not to escape responsibility but to take more of it on; she was, in Sandberg’s terms, “leaning in.” In this respect, her course more closely resembles the plot of the recently concluded television series, *The Good Wife*. Like title character Alicia Florrick who, when her husband is taken out of the picture, rekindles a professional life relinquished to raise a family, Lisa Beamer found in her 9/11 celebrity the career she had wanted but never quite had. As commentator James Carville has observed, “When you become famous, being famous becomes your profession” (qtd. in Dionne). A suddenly blossoming “profession” of fame gave Beamer the chance to act in and on the world beyond her home.
- 36 Now, while this drive toward agency has been discussed as a matter of individual input to the celebrity negotiation, it and its seemingly paradoxical coexistence with an orientation toward traditional femininity have implications for an understanding of audience and culture. Clearly Beamer had a following among women. One member of the predominantly female crowd at the book-signing event reported on by Duryea was overheard to declare the author “the greatest woman in the world.” But on just what aspect of gender exemplarity the admirer was focused is difficult to determine. Almost surely a split must have existed within this large audience segment, with some inspired by the stay-at-home mom and others by the on-the-go public personality. That split had earned a name, which would soon become a household word: the “Mommy Wars,” attesting to the vehemence with which these rival conceptions of contemporary womanhood often collided (Darnton; Steiner).
- 37 At the same time, the possibility is worth entertaining that, as with widowhood and heroism, the truest source of Beamer’s appeal lay in her capacity to represent both extremes: maintaining ‘constant presence’ for her children and being ‘everywhere’ in the media and culture, at the same time. Or, if this vision of a woman’s having it all lay too much in the realm of wish-fulfillment to be sustained, perhaps it could at least be argued that for the ‘power mom’ sub-segment of this audience, the heroic speed of Beamer’s transition from one role to the other, stepping into the phone booth the soul of domesticity and stepping out an articulate, ready-for-prime-time celebrity, must have provided an especially bracing

lesson.

Performance

- 38 The celebrity career not only gave Lisa Beamer the opportunity to exercise her power in the world beyond the home; it also afforded scope for the unfolding of previously unexercised or even unsuspected capacities. Chief among these hidden talents, and a further personal inducement to seeking fame, was one for performance. As with the other areas that have been discussed, heroism and agency, Beamer began her venture into this territory tentatively. Her qualms about undertaking that first television interview betrayed not only uncertainty about entering an unfamiliar field of endeavor but the unmistakable symptoms of performance anxiety. But her answers to questions, delivered as “honestly and straightforwardly as I knew how” (Beamer and Abraham 221), passed muster, to judge by the response of the national media to her debut. In that appearance, and in many more to follow, Lisa Beamer proved herself a “natural performer,” as Leo Braudy has put it in his study of fame, on the “democratic stage” (450).
- 39 This aptitude undoubtedly played into her initial selection for celebrity status and helps to explain her staying power in it, relative to that of other contenders for the 9/11 spotlight. More to the present point, the chance to exercise and grow the talent undoubtedly led Beamer further onward in her celebrity career. As the format of her media appearances diversified, from structured interviews to intimate *tete-a-tetes* to spots where she was allowed latitude to communicate more or less directly with viewers, the emotional satisfactions of appreciated performance—praise from hosts, call-backs from producers, fan mail from audiences, and applause (this last the true coin of the realm, to which the memoir shows her to have been exquisitely attentive)—escalated.
- 40 These two trend lines, of evolving mastery and sweetening reward, came together most decisively on an occasion described at some length in the memoir. The November 2001 “Women of Faith” conference called for a further extension of Beamer’s repertoire: a public speech to a live audience. And it allowed her to garner applause in response to a specific performance, rather than for just being there, as in the two instances earlier cited. The episode is further instructive for the light it, like the completion of Flight 93, sheds on this “reluctant celebrity’s” willingness to maximize her own opportunities.
- 41 Beamer had signed up for the event, drawing 25,000 church members, well before September 11. But her status had changed in the meantime.

When the sponsors of the event discovered that I was attending, they asked if I would share a few words with the audience. I had wanted to remain as inconspicuous as possible, but Mordecai’s rejoinder to Esther—“Who knows? Maybe God has you here for such a time as this”—echoed through my mind. I agreed to say a few words. (Beamer and Abraham 275)

The few words turned out to be a substantive, and most enthusiastically received, speech. Even before beginning, while still mounting the platform, Beamer was treated to a sustained round of applause, the conference members “clapping and clapping, to the point that it was embarrassing.” Her subsequent remarks proved eloquent beyond the merely professional standard of articulateness set in the interviews, to judge by the extensive portions quoted verbatim in the memoir, and by their reported impact: drowning the house in applause again and again. Finally, after an especially felicitous peroration, “The ‘Women of Faith’ gave me another rousing standing ovation and sent me soaring home on a cloud” (275–77).

- 42 A second photograph, taken of her onstage at the conference, captures this facet of Beamer’s new persona. The work of photographer William Thomas Cain, this image shares some features with the McNally “hero-widow” portrait of a month or so earlier, among them the maternity clothing and the

uplifted gaze. But it came at a different stage in her rapidly evolving career, and it brings out a different set of emphases. In this picture, the hair is neatly coiffed, the eyes luminous, the lips parted in what could almost be a smile, and the hands are clasped not over the curve of the pregnancy but around a wireless microphone.

Conclusion

43 The Cain photo does more than capture Lisa Beamer's performing self. It also exhibits the transformation of 'just me,' obscure suburban housewife, into 'it,' the most celebrated personality of the 9/11 tragedy.

44 The process was substantially completed in these few months' time, granted that the build-out of the hero-widow image would continue over nearly the next year. Although, as noted at the outset, it is not the whole of the story, the making of Beamer's celebrity offers significant takeaways to the fields used to investigate it.

45 With regard to celebrity studies, the record first of all offers affirmation of the Marshall negotiation model and extends it to the democratic style of fame of which Lisa Beamer appears to have been an early avatar. In this case the guest proved as able as the host, and more or less by the same triangulation of forces, to become a public personality, successor to the original "it" figure, silent film actress Clara Bow. In addition, the process as it unfolded around Beamer illuminates something beyond the bargaining among the three parties: the operation of all of them together, in what Marshall refers to the "system of celebrity" (185). Responding to an unprecedented national emergency, media, audience, and individual acted with what appears in retrospect seamless efficiency to create a true "audience-subject," drawn from the ranks of the mass public and reflecting back to it, in identifiable form, a culturally relevant stance toward the crisis. While the ultimate utility of this kind of icon-on-demand production deserves to be scrutinized, and the moral parameters of the particular stance to be weighed carefully, the "system of celebrity" surely rose to this occasion.



46 The making of Lisa Beamer's celebrity also reveals something of the American cultural landscape, both at a moment in time and in larger perspective. Not only were rituals of public grieving and attitudes toward heroism thrown into relief by the impact of 9/11. If Susan Faludi's thesis is to be credited, that impact prompted a reversion to norms of traditional femininity. At the same time, that this widow's standing up to the event that claimed her husband received such public accolade suggests that the spirit of Rosie the Riveter, who in the Second World War took over what the men were no longer there to do, was also stirred. In fact, it may be this sort of compounding of seemingly contrary impulses that the circumstances of Beamer's rise to prominence most notably reveal. Widow and hero, "power mom" taking care of the kids and public figure exercising "affective power" over the multitudes, these to all intents and purposes antithetical pairings came together here in apparently productive partnerships. The observation parallels a pioneer finding of cultural studies, coming out of the Birmingham School in Great Britain, to the effect that "subcultures" are "not always the uniform, harmonized groups one might imagine, but [are] riddled with—sometimes even founded upon—contradictions" (Bergin 246–47). The same insight, it seems, might extend to the larger reaches of a national culture, and certainly to the formation of a celebrity persona.

47 Of course, there was not only a persona but a person involved here, which brings the "self's interior" into view (Gamson, *Claims to Fame* 19). The currents and cross-currents of culture passed through a unique private reality on their path to display in the public sign of the hero widow. Indications exist that these

currents not only supplied much of the “affective power” commanded by the celebrity image but proved personally energizing to Lisa Beamer. At the same time, signs of tension appear, some in the form of the subtle self-deceptions that have been observed along the fault lines formed by those cultural contradictions. To take one example, the battle in the “mommy wars” signaled by the rift between Beamer’s words and actions regarding her commitments, would be fought internally, in disruptions to her daily round, and hard reckonings between cherished old and enticing new priorities.

48 In all, perhaps the single most critical fault line in this case ran between the two levels of identity themselves: person and persona, what Patricia and Peter Adler refer to in their study of the social psychology of fame as the “core” and the “gloried” selves (299–301, 306). The first is organic; the second is constructed, bearing the imprint of the individual, surely, but also showing the workmanship of larger, collective hands. An uneasy balance prevailed between “just me” and “it” in the making of Lisa Beamer’s 9/11 celebrity.

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