

Chapel Words (September 29, 2009)—Jo-Anne Kingstone

I'd like to talk to you this morning about someone who is near and dear to my heart: Michael Jackson. Now before you start to pass judgement or make some assumptions, let me explain.

In June of this year, Michael Jackson died and in the midst of all that had to be said about him—about his childhood, his talent, his relationships, his face, his children, his strangeness—I was reminded that in 1973 when Michael Jackson first became a hit on the music scene, I was in love with him. It was long before I met Mr. Kingstone. And I was 12.

I was in love with him in the way you fall in love when you are 12 and you are reading about someone in *Tiger Beat* magazine. Or listening to them sing songs like “ABC” or “I’ll Be There.” Or watching them dance like no boy in your grade 7 class could even dream of dancing. More than anything, I wanted to win **the contest**. I wanted to win a date with Michael Jackson. I don’t think I ever even entered the contest, but I would regularly imagine what that date would be like—I was a fairly serious, plain, vaguely plump girl. But I was sure that Michael Jackson would prefer an evening with me rather than one of those pretty, fatuous, skinny girls you would regularly see in pictures with celebrities. On the basis of what, I don’t know, but I was still sure we could become great friends.

But, no surprise, by the time Jackson was a full-blown sensation, I had, I guess, moved on, fallen out of love. He was cranking out hits, changing his looks, being seen with every celebrity imaginable. I was finishing high school, starting and then finishing university, getting my first job. I was no longer that 12-year-old girl in love with the idea of a dream date. Even though hits like “Thriller,” “Billie Jean” and the famous moonwalk were defining Jackson as perhaps the most successful entertainer of just about forever, it was not my music. I actually can’t remember what I was listening to in the 80s and 90s when Jackson was on his trajectory to superstardom, but I know he was not part of my mainstream. And then, of course, things seemed to get very strange—constant news about bad relationships, bad plastic surgery, bad behaviour, bad Neverland adventures, bad choices in pets, bad press. If you believed even a portion of what was written you would see that dream date slipping irretrievably into a nightmare.

In June, however, in a way, I fell in love with Michael Jackson again. Once again, there was a lot of noise about who he was, how or why he died, about some of the crazy things he said or did. But then, underneath, there was also another story emerging—this story told about a life without a childhood, a life with a demanding, abusive father, a life constantly on display, a life of relentless work and doubt and loneliness. Also a life of absolute, incredible talent, a life dedicated

to charitable work, a life that made pathways for other African Americans in sport, in entertainment, in music.

I can't tell you for sure what was or is true about Michael Jackson. I can't say whether or not all the fuss over his death, the books, the television programming, the public memorial were necessary or not. And maybe you are even beginning to wonder a bit about me, that I have given Jackson and his life this much thought. But here's the reason I did find myself longing for that dream date again last June.

First of all, I just found it so terribly sad that this man had died. There'd be no more music. No more chances to learn what he was trying to communicate to the world.

And then, in a way, I wanted to be able to apologize to Michael Jackson because I found I had done what so many had done—I'd taken what was given to me regardless of the source and made my judgements about him. I saw the photos, I read the news, I listened to the noise. And what the noise told me was: he was weird, he was unreliable, he was pretty messed up. Sure he could still sing and dance, sometimes, but really, what about that nose?

I guess, in a way, I felt guilty that I had so easily fallen into the trap of taking a few details about someone and assuming I could draw my conclusions about their whole life based on that—I filled in what I didn't know with the same negative noise I heard all around me. I made a judgement about a person based on incomplete and perhaps even incorrect information.

Again, I have no idea really about the life of Michael Jackson. But I do know that his death reminded me about the dangers of misjudgment we **all** fall prey to time and again. Maybe it's just a funny look someone gives you and you don't know why, maybe they seem to snap at you without cause, maybe they wear funny clothes, or talk differently, or don't have the same kind of family you do or they aren't as smart or they are smarter, or they don't run as fast, or they don't like art, or, or, or.

You get my point. We experience people and then we try to add things up to get a conclusion of what kind of person they are. The truth is there's always so much more to a person than what you see or what you think you know. Always. And because of that, one and one don't necessarily make two when you are adding up people.

It's human nature. You might even say that since the beginning of time it's been a feature of our very survival, to come to conclusions about people—it helps us to know who should be in our tribe, who we can hunt with, who we can count on. Every year we come together in September, every year we invite at least 150, sometimes more, like this year, sometimes fewer, new people into the tribe that is Shawnigan. Every year we go through the process of standing back and assessing each other. In our classes, in our Houses, on teams; in the art room, our

teachers, our roommates, our classmates, people in our House, people we just happen to see playing ping pong in the Ritz. It's a matter of survival. But, my friends, I encourage you to remember that it is very easy to make a mistake, to misjudge, to assess someone's difference as a handicap, someone's reticence as incompetence, someone's fear as lack of trust, someone's words as anything other than their own attempt to fit in, to find a spot, to feel good in this place we all know and love. Given that, I might suggest we make the effort **not** to do the math; make the effort to know someone without ever actually coming up with a conclusion about them—leave it open. That way, the dream date is always a possibility. And you can always find, you can always be, another friend.