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Why bother with Big Brother?

*Unlike Big Brother, God does not use
our vulnerabilities to control us*

A year ago

Can you believe it? It is a year since Shilpa Shetty (Bollywood actress, model and animal rights spokesperson) was crowned winner of the 2007 series of Channel 4's *Celebrity Big Brother*. More significantly, perhaps, it is a year since Ofcom received a record-breaking 40,000 viewer complaints prompted by allegedly racist bullying directed at Shilpa by three of her *Big Brother* housemates: Jade Goody (winner of *Big Brother* 2002), Danielle Lloyd (winner of Miss England 2002) and Jo O'Meara (former S Club 7 singer).

And, like it or not, *Big Brother* looks as though it is going to be around for some time yet. *BB* is popular with young and old alike. But how can we turn the fascination with Channel 4's most profitable programme into useful teaching and learning points?

Big Brother v God

The parallels between the 'character' of Big Brother and the God of the Bible are fairly clear. Using learner's familiarity with the all-seeing and ever-present watcher from the television programme, we can begin to introduce the concepts of God's omniscience and omnipresence. As an aside: a more sophisticated variation on this theme can be found in *The Truman Show* (1998, Paramount Home Entertainment), the triple Oscar nominated movie starring Jim Carrey.

Whilst God and Big Brother may share the ability to see all and be present everywhere in their respective kingdoms, there are clear distinctions. Big Brother is, of course, a figure of deep malevolence found in George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (written in 1948; published in 1949). In the book, Big Brother's purpose for looking into the minute detail of people's lives is to gain control over them, and to force them to conform to his every thought and deed through threat.

Whilst his servants sought to cast him as a friendly uncle, the truth was that he was no respecter of people. He had no interest in the individuality of people and in their growth into human fullness. Contrast this with the Psalmist's words in Psalm 139 where he makes it plain that he does not see God's knowledge as threatening.

God's interest in our lives is the interest of a loving Father. Unlike Big Brother, God does not use our vulnerabilities to control us. Rather He meets us in our vulnerabilities and offers us healing and wholeness.

Encouraging pupils to ask questions and draw comparisons between Bible texts about the character of God and their own understanding of the concept of Big Brother could be a useful way to encourage discussion about the nature of God.

Judgement and punishment

Young people are often very interested in questions of authority. Many a teacher hears the words 'Why should I?' or 'You can't make me!' in response to a civilly asked instruction.

Orwell's Big Brother uses the vulnerability of the people to coerce them into accepting his overarching control. The least pliable are always aware of the ultimate threat: Room 101. In the novel, Room 101 turns out to be a place filled with a person's greatest fear.

In the television programme, Big Brother asserts control by granting extra privileges or withdrawing all but the bare essentials. The ultimate sanction is eviction from the house.

These ideas could be used to introduce a discussion on the Christian concept of God's judgement and punishment. Two elements of biblical teaching can, I believe, be seen in the elements of judgement and punishment present in the *Big Brother* house.

First of all there is the quality of life in the house. This is not dissimilar from the Christian belief that the quality of a person's earthly life can be directly affected by their response to the Lord. It can be extrapolated further with examples of how everyone in the *BB* house suffers because of the failure of one or two to complete a task. The television programme reminds us that individual human actions do not only affect that individual's life, but often have an impact on those around them. Of course, as Christian educators, we would want to guard against giving young people the unbiblical idea that all human suffering is a direct judgement on that person's life – this is why it is important to balance the examples chosen.



Shilpa Shetty

The second element is the eviction. The housemates are separated from their 'family' (the other housemates) and from Big Brother's overseeing eye. Once they are cast out they are disqualified forever from the prize – a rather nice cheque in the case of the *Big Brother* programme! (Shilpa Shetty won £100,000.) If for Christians the 'prize' is eternity with God then 'hell' is being denied this prize. To put it another way: if heaven is being able to say 'I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever' (Psalm 23:6), then hell is eviction from or, more precisely, non-invitation to the Lord's house. Again, care needs to be taken in drawing parallels between *BB* and the Bible. For one thing, *BB* is about competition, whilst the Bible emphasises completion. There can only be one *BB* winner per series, but Christ promises salvation to all who finish the course (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

The human condition

The greatest thing *Big Brother* has to offer is the invaluable insight it offers into the human condition. Since those who enter the house do so under no duress, we can assume that we are watching those who are willing to be the focus of attention.

Watching the relationships and actions displayed in the house gives us the opportunity to watch and assess human behaviour at arm's length. This is a benefit because – it could be argued – seeing in others our own faults gives us the opportunity to critically analyse such behaviours in an emotionally neutral way. In the expert's hands these remote analysts can be encouraged to turn their gaze inward and challenge themselves about their own similar behaviour. The skilful use of the 'So, what do we learn from this?' question can begin to use the viewer's critique as a light to search their own lives.

BB may not have the power to transform fuddy-duddy teachers into cool role models

Encouraging keen youngsters to move beyond the 'tittle-tattle' of what they have seen, to the discussion of what lies behind such actions, can give them useful opportunities to discuss:

- their personal values, attitudes and motives
- their understanding of the human condition in general.

There are a multitude of themes that can be explored through discussing the events inside the *Big Brother* house.

Ofcom received a record-breaking 40,000 viewer complaints prompted by allegedly racist bullying

Insight

The effects of failure come out as housemates display their personal weaknesses and this impacts the others in the house. We see the importance of sensitivity to others as housemates learn that they need to tolerate the quirks and annoyances they find in others if they are going to be able to live together. The effects of unforgiveness are evident if previous conflict continues to cast a shadow over the relationships between housemates. Or we see the opposite outcome, if housemates are able to rebuild their relationships through reconciliation and understanding.

The 2007 series of *Celebrity Big Brother* gave us a wonderful insight into the impact of ignorance. We saw the huge difference between those who have a limited view of the impact of their behaviour and the rest of us looking in from the outside reacting according to our own values. The row that led to international news bulletins started over a food item (stock-cubes if I remember rightly). For those in the house the stock-cube was a major issue. For those of us looking on, this was an irrelevant matter; the issue for

us was the way in which certain contestants chose to express their anger.

There is a lot of material here on the issues that arise when value systems collide. This could help to explain wonderfully Jesus' words about planks in eyes (Matthew 7:5). The crowing of those who knew better against those who should have known better eventually began to stick in the craw. How many of us as adults, let alone the youngsters we teach, readily and loudly condemn in another that which we cannot see in our own lives? I am thinking mainly of the offence that comes from speaking in ignorance, rather than meaning to suggest that we are all guilty of being out-and-out racists.

Its fiercest critics may condemn *Big Brother* as a grotesque exhibition of humanity at its self-indulgent worst, and you may tend to agree. However, Channel 4 seems determined to run with it for a few more years yet. I am not convinced it is entertainment, but I can see that – handled appropriately – it has the potential to be a great teaching tool. *BB* may not have the power to transform fuddy-duddy teachers into cool role models, but it does have the potential to help some of the students who most often turn off in class to tune in to discussions about things of eternal consequence. And that can't be all bad, can it?

■ Dalwyn Attwell

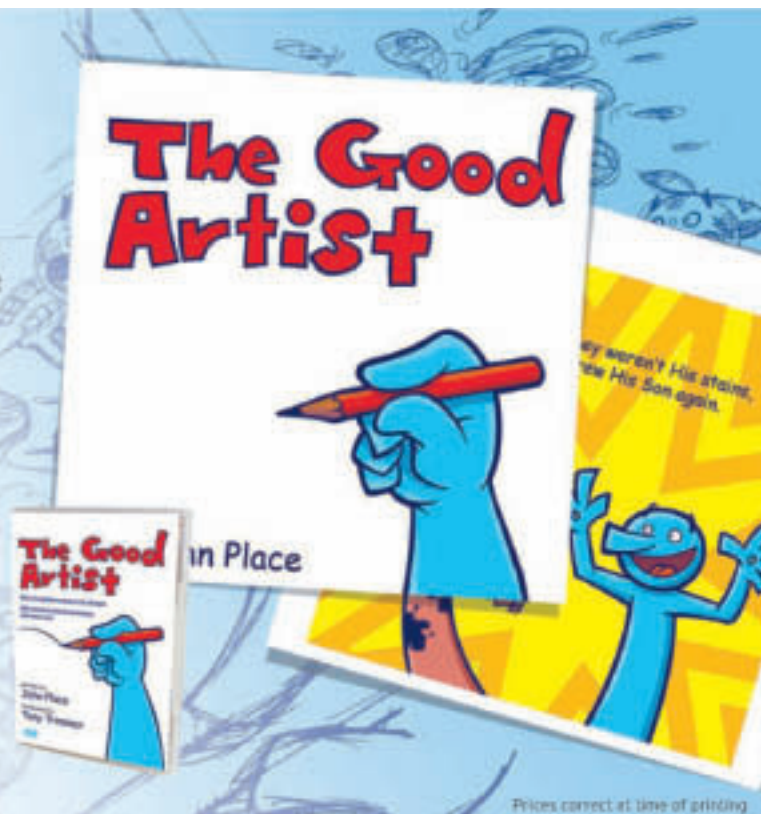
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