

Youth Culture Lesson
Finding Teachable Moments in Culture
From *YouthWorker Journal* and YouthWorker.com

Catfished: The Strange Story of Manti Te'o
By Paul Asay

What Happened:

A month ago, Manti Te'o was the toast of the college football world. The Notre Dame linebacker had led his team to the national championship game—despite suffering from losing his girlfriend Lennay Kekua to cancer.

Now, Te'o is more laughingstock than lauded football player. A few weeks ago, he revealed that his girlfriend didn't die. In fact, she wasn't even a girl. Te'o never had met the girl in person, and he'd been fooled through countless phone calls and computer-based interactions. Te'o was, he says, the victim of an elaborate hoax, and Lennay was a *catfish*.

The term stems from a fish industry fable. Shippers allegedly used to add catfish to barrels full of live cod. The catfish would force the cod to swim in the barrel so they wouldn't get all mushy. Likewise, online catfish supposedly keep the rest of us on our toes. As they fool an unfortunate few, they remind us that people online are not always who they appear to be.

A decade ago, Te'o's story would've been inconceivable. How could anyone carry on a relationship with someone who never existed? Even now, many observers are suspicious, wondering whether Te'o was part of the hoax all along—using the story to inspire his team.

However, in an age when so much of our interactions are online instead of face to face, people are catfished all the time. MTV has created a whole reality on the premise. "Catfish: The TV Show" follows people as they track down people they've known and, in some cases, loved. Very often, the people they meet in person are much different than the people they met online—if they're real people at all.

Writes Leonard Pitts Jr. for *The Miami Herald*:

"Here, then, in a nutshell, is the great paradox of the communications revolution. It has left us both better connected and yet further apart, because actual contact is no longer required. Indeed, we'll likely see more stories [such as] these as texting substitutes for conversation, Facebook supplants friendship and we *live* ever more online."

Talk About It:

Do you believe Manti Te'o was a victim of a hoax, or was he an accomplice? Why? Is it possible to be fooled so completely by someone's online persona?

Are there people you know online whom you've never met in person? Have you ever made friends or dated someone online without having seen them? Have you ever been fooled online, learning that someone wasn't who they represented themselves to be?

You don't need to be catfished to be misled, of course. Many people can seem very different online than they are in person: People sometimes tell white lies or make it a point to create a more exciting personal profile of themselves. Of course, lots of us tend to sugarcoat our online profiles—telling people about the great things going on in our lives while downplaying or hiding the things that aren't so great.

Is your online self pretty much the same as your real self? What sorts of things do you share online? What sorts of things do you decide to keep to yourself? If someone you didn't know except on Facebook met you for real, what might surprise them about you?

We all know that people are not always what they seem either online or in real life. Even when we've known someone most of our lives, they can do something that makes us wonder whether we really know them at all. However, God always is exactly who He promises to be. Can you name some attributes of God—who He tells us He is? Can you name how He proves it to us, day after day?

What the Bible Says:

“For these men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve” (2 Cor. 11:13-15).

“You live in the midst of deception; in their deceit they refuse to acknowledge Me, declares the Lord. Therefore this is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘See, I will refine and test them, for what else can I do because of the sin of My people?’” (Jer. 9:6-7).