

Youth and The Contradictions of Our Time

by
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Several years ago, when my oldest son was in Cub Scouts, a cake baking competition caught my attention. I had fond memories of baking cakes from my childhood. My brother and I made many cakes with special designs, and as adults have remained active in the kitchen. Since my son was not as interested in the more traditional scouting activities, I thought this contest would appeal to him. I thought it would be for him a good introduction to “the real world” of competition. While we stood a good chance at winning the competition, the chances were greater that we would lose. He would experience the fun and work of preparing a project, the pride of showing it to others, the anxiety of being judged, and either the elation of winning or the pain of losing.

We worked several days in advance of the competition. It was necessary to pick out a design that was unique and would catch the judge’s eye. It was the holiday season, so we created a cake from 3 single layers cut in various shapes and laid on a flat surface in the image of Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer. We frosted the cake with white frosting, toasted coconut and sprinkled it on the reindeer’s body, and placed gumdrops on the cake for Rudolf’s eye and red nose.

The night of the competition was then upon us. Off we went with our cake, taking care not to squash it in the moving car as we drove, walking carefully along the ice-covered sidewalk and eager to see how we compared to the others. We surveyed our competition. Many of the entries were simple cakes made from a mix. Others were obviously purchased at the store bakery before the pack meeting began. There were a few more creative designs that presented a bit more competition. A few entries weren’t even cakes at all, just store-purchased doughnuts and cookies.

We were told that the ordinary pack meeting would take place while several adults judged the cakes. I gave perfunctory attention to the mundane business at hand while the judges were busy studying the cakes and writing notes while they

conferred with one another. The moment finally arrived when the results of the competition were announced. We gathered around while the judges stood in front of us. They explained that there were so many outstanding entries that there would be no single winner that night. Instead, every contestant was awarded a “first prize” award for a category created by the judges. There was a first prize for the most colorful cake, the most original, the blandest, the largest, and the smallest... the list went on and on. There even was an award for a scout who didn’t enter anything. “Everyone won!” the judges exclaimed

At home, I found myself consumed with an inner rage. I ranted to my wife and then retreated in sullen silence. Had I become so invested in the project that I had set myself up for a narcissistic injury?

raising children... requires an acceptance that their children will also experience pain along the way.

After all, it was a simple cake baking competition for kids. While my son was bothered, he quickly got over it, but I was the one who couldn’t give it a rest. Eventually, the rage subsided and we returned to the daily affairs of every day life. The incident continued to trouble me, though, even years later. On reflection, while my rage reaction was clearly narcissistic, its replacement with feelings of disappointment and irritation are related to the contradictions I see modern day adults impart to children, as exemplified by the contest.

The “real world” is a competitive one. We compete with others for jobs, resources, property, partners, cheap plane tickets, special mortgage rates, etc. In order to compete effectively, certain innate and learned skills are required. Among those are resilience, organizational ability, abstract reasoning, and a measure of intrepidity. Reflective capability, e.g. the ability to access prior learning and the emotions connected to those memories, is also a prerequisite. I was motivated to engage in the contest through my ability to access memories of winning and losing in previous competitive endeavors. Many adults encourage children to compete, yet their subsequent statements and actions undermine the acquisition of the

critical reflective capability, hence the contradiction.

In order to illustrate, let’s return to the actions of those judges. They wished to avoid a situation where there would be one winner and many losers. They knew that if they placed a higher value on competition than inclusiveness, many children and their overprotective parents would feel bad and perhaps protest. Their desire to avoid any negative feelings overrode the basic reality of competition – there can be only one winner. The results of their actions were that those who worked hard in the competition felt deflated and demoralized while everyone else went home feeling artificially victorious. What was lost in the process, however, was the opportunity for the contestants to experience “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat” – feelings that might be accessed in future experience.

In my practice, I see increasing numbers of youth with narcissistic disturbances. Often their parents have arranged the consultation to affix a medical diagnosis to their child. Inherent in seeking a medical diagnosis is the notion that a “chemical imbalance” is the problem, presumably correctable with medication. I sidestep the issue of diagnosis and instead begin to work with the parents on setting limits and using consequences appropriately in order to teach their child reflective capability. I then hear remarks such as “I can’t put him through that”, “it isn’t easy”, “we tried that for awhile and it didn’t work”, and “if we did that she would throw a fit”. Finally, more times than not, I hear “isn’t there a medication that would make everything better?” Although they want their child to unlearn their narcissistic attitudes and behavior patterns, parents want it to be easy and pain-free. I end up referring them to M. Scott Peck’s book, *The Road Less Traveled*, the opening sentence of which is “Life is difficult.”

Yes, life is difficult. Pain and frustration are an inevitable consequence of living. The experience the pain that accompanies rejection, ostracism, failure, and loss is a necessary developmental step for all children. Attempting to protect them from this pain by trying to include every child and make each feel only like a winner has only temporary benefits. Over the longer term, they are afforded a disservice because the experience is not accessible

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