In praise of Insecurity

Sometime in the past three decades, confidence, assertiveness, self-esteem—whatever you call it—became matter for concern, especially in the USA. Public television displayed serious, furrowed-browed experts discussing the threatened self-esteem of adolescent females, their prior, proud, prepubertal confidence drowning in a sea of oestrogens. What to do? What do we do for any social ill? The answer fairly leapt from the screen: education! We must take these fragile beings, these saplings in the wind, and teach them self-assertiveness, empower them. Classes in self-esteem soon flourished. Out of some misguided attempt at symmetry, similar classes were promoted for adolescent boys. I know adolescent boys. Few need self-esteem enhancement.

The movement spread. Business schools soon offered MSE degrees (Master of Self-Esteem). Students in adult self-assertiveness classes were given homework assignments such as sending back the wine or refusing to pay for a disappointing dessert at a fancy restaurant. Now the products of assertiveness training have reached adulthood, flooding our medical schools and our boardrooms.

Sometimes I wonder if I am a homework assignment. A medical student confidently questions my diagnoses on rounds, and I scramble to justify my thinking, only later remembering that I have been a physician for 28 years, and lie for minus two. I have never fared well in my dealings with the self-esteem. “I am a good people person” one said to me. “If you’re such a good people person, how come you make my skin crawl?” I wanted to reply.

I know what you are thinking: “This guy could do with a bit more confidence; maybe assertiveness training would help.” No, no, no, no. There is something fundamentally false, even destructive, about the message of self-esteem. Think about the homework assignments. It doesn’t matter whether the wine or dessert is actually good or not. It doesn’t matter if another person is harmed. The self-esteem (or steemers, as I prefer to call them) live for these moments. There is no external or fixed set of values. Everything is relative.

Life is a series of subtle contests with other people. If you look or feel bad, then I look or feel relatively good. And there is no memory. Steemers can switch opinions in mid-air if it makes them look better on landing.

This is not self-esteem we are instilling it is arrogance. Real self-esteem is the inner feedback one gets from doing the right thing. Most of my octogenerian patients possess considerable self-esteem. They have earned it. Teaching self-esteem shortcircuits that loop. It is as if we thought that changing the speedometer readings would make cars go faster. It doesn’t work that way.

We have reached the crisis stage. Draconic measures are required to re-establish shyness and humility as cultural values. A conspiracy is in order. We should pick off the steemers one by one, mess with their minds, feed the insecurity that surely lurks somewhere deep in their souls. Be direct. One line you might try is: “your life is a sham, John, and you know it”. Spoken softly and authoritatively, and placed in the middle of an otherwise innocuous conversation, it can have an interesting effect.

Team up with a friend. The next time an MSE administrator is giving a presentation, pick a random piece of his anatomy, a left knee, for example, and stare at it in mild disapproval. You might soon detect a certain hesitancy of speech, an occasional stammer or blush. Who knows? Meekness may take hold. The response “I’m not sure” might again become permissible. Thoughtfulness may return to human interaction. If not, at least we can have fun trying.

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