

The Importance of Learning to be a Good Loser

by B. Lent
(April 29, 2015)

In our Western culture, we like to speak with contempt of “losers”, “suckers”, “weaklings”, etc. “There’s a sucker born every minute”, we like to say. We place the greatest emphasis on “getting what we want”, and on making as much money as possible, even if that requires walking over our best friend’s dead body. Selling our grandma is fine, so long as the price is right. The ruthless victor is our ideal: the hero with the slashing sword, cutting down everything before him, and the robber baron who becomes insanely rich by squeezing the last penny out of people who can’t defend themselves. Striving for excellence alone is not enough for us. We must **win** to gain respect. And in order for us to win, someone else must be the abject loser.

This basic attitude, of course, also informs our historic conduct. We can’t be happy if our country is not “Number One” in the world. Which means that all others must be less powerful, less important, less respected. And all others must pay due tribute to our greatness.

Is it a wonder if this mind-set has led to incessant warfare and brutality down the ages? It is deeply rooted in man’s nature to be sensitive to such hierarchies. In other words, everyone wants to be Number One. And those who can’t make it, feel wounded and downtrodden.

There are those who manage to reconcile themselves to this fate and can calmly deal with the lack of respect they get, being well enough grounded in themselves; but others react by lashing out in rage and resentment, and by seeking, and often finding, a cause on which they can expend their frustrated excited energies, destroying that which they blame for holding them back, and quite frequently themselves in the process, too. It is not surprising that most of the people who commit massacres like the frequent school shootings are individuals who feel that they are being bullied and disrespected.

Right now, we find one such example in the case of the elder Tsarnayev brother Tamerlan (named perhaps in the way of an omen after the dread Mongol Emperor Tamerlan), who has been declared the moving force behind the 2013 Marathon bombing that killed three people and wounded many more. It appears that he, too, was nudged into the pursuit of violence by a perceived slight, when he was not allowed to enter a career that he expected to lead him to international fame as a professional boxer, because he was not a US citizen. (To say nothing of his tragic ethnic background) He most probably would have done less damage, and lived longer, if this legitimate outlet for his ambitions had been open to him.

Another such frustrated ambitious young man was a certain Adolf Hitler, who sought fame as a painter, but was stymied by not being admitted to the Vienna art academy. (Nor did the fact that he was gassed during WW I help his mental health very much.) The rejection by the academy, plus some other real or perceived slights by the Vienna establishment seems to have led to his insane hatred of Jews, who at that time played a prominent role in Austrian cultural life. Quite a few people have since remarked ruefully that it might have saved the world untold grief if he had been allowed to develop his modest painting talent instead of riding the crest of WW I’s negative consequences to the leadership of neighboring Germany and dragging the world into the next global war.

Would it not be a much more productive approach if we changed the direction of our educational system and learned to make a place in human society for those who do not have the talent or feverish drive to struggle to the top of the heap? What, after all, would those top-of-the-heapers do if there were no heap to sustain them?

Since egotism is one of the strongest human emotions, we would have to start as early as possible, in kindergarten at the latest, to develop a nurturing, supportive atmosphere and teach the little tykes that friendship and mutual assistance is a much more promising basis for individual happiness than the constant struggle to get the better of everyone else. This idea, by the way, has long ago been scientifically put forth by Prince Peter Kropotkin, a Russian geographer, economist, activist, philologist, zoologist, evolutionary theorist, philosopher, writer and prominent anarchist, whose most famous work is entitled "Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution".

The spirit of cooperation could also be furthered by incorporating in the teaching joint projects by groups of children, with any praise for the achievement evenly spread among the entire group. Thus replacing individual competition with cooperation, it would be easier to achieve an atmosphere of harmony among the whole class.

Since it is simply impossible in life to always win, we should also try to teach children that losing is no shame, and that we can pick ourselves up after a fall or failure and proceed from there, doing our best under the respective circumstances and seeing how far we can get. It is very important for us to learn that we all fail from time to time, that failure is a part of life, and that we can take it as a challenge to do better next time. Our failures give us the chance to develop our skills of recovery. In fact, it is a burden for an individual to fail too little, since it leaves him less able to deal with failure when it comes. As come it will - sooner or later.

In addition to preventing the discouragement of weaker minds and the wounding of less resilient psyches by bullying or triumphal crowing, common efforts and achievements can more easily create a general atmosphere of curiosity and learning that leads to a higher level of overall achievement, which in turn tends to lead to happiness.

What would be wrong with that?

#

#

#

#

#