

Confronting the Culture of Disrespect

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Two features of contemporary American life may seem entirely unconnected, but upon closer inspection they stand out as dimensions of the same unsettling pattern. One is an all-too-familiar disposition in human relationships, an attitude about how to treat people that strongly affects our children and undermines even the best-planned attempts to educate them. Although it manifests itself in what seem to be scattered, annoying incidents in the lives of kids, this attitude has recently achieved attention as a malady of national concern. A second feature finds expression in a strategy of technological change characteristic of our dynamic “new economy.” Celebrated as a wonderful recipe for prosperity, this strategy is rooted in a general orientation to the world that, in its broader dimensions, projects a dubious path for social development.

To introduce the phenomenon, I would ask you to notice the bitter sting it brings to the lives of many children. We all know that teasing and bullying have long been problems in childhood and adolescence. Most of us have encountered such nastiness in one way or another; it’s something young people have always had to get used to, move beyond, and eventually outgrow. But during the past two decades or so, activities formerly dismissed as innocuous pestering have undergone a profound transformation. Tearing down people in public, making them feel bad about who they are and what they feel, has intensified and become a refined art, one supported by powerful forces in our culture.

The youngsters I know best are boys, my own children and their friends in middle school and high school, who put up with verbal abuse, subtle threats and put-downs in school every day. Some in the group are strong enough to withstand the continuous barrage, dishing it back or just ignoring the stupid, vicious taunts. But I’ve seen a number of boys wither under the barrage, fall silent, retreat into computer games, change schools, and disconnect from all but one or two friends who also feel abused by their classmates.

Teachers in both public and independent schools tell me that the atmosphere of negativity in student subcultures, far from being a minor annoyance, has become one of the most serious barriers to teaching and learning they have to confront each day, filling much of the social space in halls and classrooms. No one seems to know what to do about it. When I suggested to my wife, a counselor at an independent school, that we tackle the problem directly at least among the boys

and parents who are in our close circle of friends — have a meeting where a policy of “no tear down” would be discussed — she said it would not work, that “kids don’t operate that way.” She’s probably right. But what other solutions are available? There seem to be no ready answers.

It’s clear that kids are busily at work sorting and sifting and categorizing: who’s a jock, who’s a prep, who’s a nerd, who’s a goth, who’s located where in the pecking order. Generations of teenagers, including my own decades ago, have played this game, sometimes with appalling results. But somehow the persistence, intensity and sheer meanness of the process we see today goes much further. We know that Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, the two killers at Columbine High School in Colorado, saw themselves as retaliating against schoolmates who had repeatedly tormented them. There is, of course, no excuse for their murderous acts. But what surprises me is how frequently I hear boys I know staunchly defend Klebold and Harris in words that come close to admiration. “Oh, yeah, I know where they were coming from,” they observe without a hint of irony. “I have to put up with that stuff too.”

The name I would give to the malady that afflicts young people is aggressive disrespect. In today’s slang it is known as “dissing,” an attitude brashly exhibited throughout our society. It’s present in movies, television programs, radio talk shows, sports, journalism, and politics. In stand-up comedy and sit-coms, the prevalent form of humor is the put-down followed by a burst of canned laughter: insult — laugh track — public embarrassment — laugh track — personal barb — laugh track. It’s also common in sports where trash talk and dissing have become essential rituals of the game. One also sees it in the personal attack ads that have become standard fare in election campaigns, a style of propaganda that allows candidates on both sides to avoid discussing important public issues and to blather on about an opponent’s “character” instead.

In movies and television, of course, the relentless barrage of verbal abuse is tied to exhibitions of physical violence, where catharsis is achieved by shooting one’s enemies, beating them up, or blowing them away. The same is true of video games — Quake, Doom, Half Life, and countless others — where the players participate in simulated gore. Earlier hopes that video games would engage children in more positive, educationally enriching activities have proven a risible fantasy. All of the best-selling games involve the players in ceaseless episodes of mayhem and slaughter. In all the electronic media available to them, our children receive a steady diet of social contempt produced by prominent role models encouraging aggressive disrespect, disrespect that assumes violence as its natural terminus. To an increasing extent this way of being is what is expected of young people, what is held out as “cool” in our society. Unlike the “cool” upheld by beatnik poets of the 1950s — existential detachment with Zen aspirations — today’s “cool” is simply the meeting ground of unreflective nihilism and shopping mall fashion.

My point is not that television, video games and other forms of mass media “cause” the kinds of violence of the sort that crops up so often in American schools. It is always difficult to pinpoint specific causes of savagery within the complex strands of influence that shape people’s behavior. What I want point out instead are some astonishingly bleak background conditions that color the experiences and expectations of childhood in our time. In ways that our nation refuses to confront, the everyday sources of torment now undermine prospects for a healthy sense of self, crippling a youngster’s ability to engage the world in active, hopeful ways. Struggling with the culture of contempt, boys—and many girls as well—learn to “be strong” by internalizing a distinctly dreary vision of life’s possibilities.

The mood of aggressive disrespect is also prominent in what appears to be an entirely separate realm of human affairs, namely that of business and technology, celebrated as a place of lively entrepreneurship, innovation and productivity, supposedly the path to a brighter future. Here we see the glorious marriage of capital and technique spawning countless projects that will eventually alter how people live and think. The economic approach commonly followed in this domain at present is what the economist Joseph Schumpeter long ago called “creative destruction.” As interpreted today, this means that one begins by locating an entity with recognized value attached to it, often a value that has existed in a particular social setting for a long while. The challenge is to devise an alternative, an effective replacement launched in a new medium, especially the dynamic medium of digital communications. This strategy presents opportunities for rapid recapitalization and reorganization in every corner of economic life. Markets are captured and profits won as digital bits and money flow in new directions at the speed of light. In this process every institution, practice, relationship, artifact, and natural entity is now subject to renovation and/or replacement. The fact that an object, activity or institution has flourished for decades and has tangible value attached to it is sufficient grounds for targeting it for liquidation. In the global marketplace, if an entity cannot compete with the alternatives arrayed against it, then it is doomed to extinction.

An example of what I am calling aggressive disrespect here is exhibited in Daniel Burrus’ book *Technotrends*. Burrus argues that if your line of work has become what he calls a “cash cow,” a reliable source of income, you must innovate in ways that replace it with the newest, relevant technology. “Kill your cash cow or someone will do it for you,” Burrus advises. In this way of thinking, for example, teachers would be well-advised to get out to the teaching business and into educational software because that is where the technotrends are moving. The prescription: liquidate all sources of value and re-capitalize.

An outlook of this sort is coin of the realm in Silicon Valley, Seattle, and other centers of high tech panache. To suggest that an organism, artifact, or institution should be acknowledged for what it is, respected or even cherished for the good it does is entirely at odds with this

sensibility. Tools, traditions, and whole biological genomes are now under scrutiny for the ways in which they might be altered or replaced by those with better, profit-seeking plans.

To ask respect for any person, thing, practice, or institution is problematic because, as we all know, respect is something that must be earned. But if one lives in a culture that relishes disrespect for anything and everything, then teachable moments about how things earn enduring value are few and far between. Even the earlier sense that there was an overall, accumulated residue of scientific, technical and social change that could reasonably be called “progress” is no longer a topic of interest. Only those changes predicated on a limited, short-term, rapid turn-over of goods are ones worth considering. That is why so many people prefer the terms “innovation” and “creative destruction” to the outmoded category of “progress” these days.

The various kinds of aggressive disrespect I’ve described are clearly connected in important ways. For example, if one wanted a society in which students would leave schools highly dissatisfied and disrespectful of anything in society and nature, ready to launch changes for the sake of change itself, then the schools we’ve got are serving quite well, for they operate as laboratories of disrespect, and breeding grounds for restless innovation without any deeper human purpose. Students leave the schools ready for the mentality of high tech enterprise — the belief that everything that exists is simply an opportunity for innovation and profitable reconfiguration. The books, libraries, bookstores, publishers — throw them out and begin anew. Teachers, classrooms, conventional teaching materials — discard them and start over with online gadgets. Here’s the prescription for change: Identify any vocation or profession; find a way to re-encode its message; take it to the market; cash in your stock options and move on to the next golden opportunity. It works just as well with objects in nature. Take the genome of a fruit fly (or what we’re told is its close relative, the human being), uncover its genetic map, and get ready to move and shake.

Among engineers and technical experts there has long been earnest discussion about the ethics that ought to guide professional conduct. Over many decades a wide range of moral principles and arguments have helped focus reflection on this matter. But increasingly, it seems to me, there is a de facto ethic that guides what a great many people are inclined to do in matters of technological change. It is the ethic of “Hell, why not?” A restlessness and dissatisfaction continually seek opportunities to modify whatever entities seem ripe for transformation and recapitalization. That disposition toward change is far different from the one that seeks positive, lasting improvement in society, in our relations with natural things, or in the artificial complex that surrounds us. No, that is simply not what technical intentions are about these days.

It is with considerable grief that I recall the kinds of overt and quiet suffering I’ve witnessed among the youngsters assaulted by the culture of disrespect and pressured to join it. What can be done to help them? What can protect them from the ways of being so persuasively modeled as

people, things, and ideas are dissed, dismantled, demolished, and discarded? What can deflect them from the work of callous disrespect that awaits them within today's hyper-linked, hyperventilating corporate economy?

I don't know. But pondering the torrents of disrespect I've seen drowning the spark of childhood recently, I'm reminded of a letter Henry James once sent to a nephew who had asked his advice on how to succeed. James decided to give the young man some simple wisdom:

“Three things in human life are important.
The first is to be kind.
The second is to be kind.
And the third is to be kind.”

I wonder: In a period of history hell bent on other pursuits, how can the virtues of kindness and respect toward other beings be taught?

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