



The Parent Test, Pt. 1:

School Shooters and the Worship of Winning

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I recently watched a show called The Parent Test, featuring ten families that supposedly represent ten distinctly different parenting styles. That particular conceit seemed a bit absurd to me simply because the entire panel is pretty clearly divided into just two camps: On one side, authoritarian assholes who are oh-so-pleased with themselves for treating their kids like pets in training; on the other, secure grown ups who treat their progeny as genuine human beings because they ~~don't have fragile adult egos that require them to dominate~~ their dependents. And yes, of course each family is unique, but this one primary distinction looks to capture the ~~biggest~~ ^{biggest} differences among them.

As I watched that first episode, I was struck by some parents' extreme emphasis on competition, on success as a function of beating others, and an uncomfortable thought crept into my head. I wondered... could we be watching a common origin story of school shooters here? Please don't misunderstand, I am not saying that strict, "high-achievement" parenting directly creates murderers out of those who are subjected to it. Rather, I'm suggesting that an authoritarian, results-oriented parenting philosophy tends to produce compulsively ~~competitive~~ competitive offspring whose pathological status-striving may cause some other kids, kids who are less conventionally successful in athletic, academic, and other adolescent popularity contests, to feel disregarded or even defective. It seems to me that too often, in youth and beyond, our "winners" are encouraged to speak and act in ways that are belittling, borderline bullying, toward the "losers". From there it may be that our ingrained worship of winning and abhorrence of losing pushes some of those second and third and tenth place kids to imagine that their personal validation can only come from the barrel of a gun. And, quite honestly, for ~~some kid~~ ^{some kid} who's been made to feel his life is worthless anyway, should we be so shocked when he at least entertains the value of sacrificing ~~such a life~~ ^{such a life} for that one spectacular victory, the one explosive climax that finally gets him that all-important "W" and proves to everyone that he really did matter after all?

"If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other"

- Mother Teresa

This, then, is some of what came to mind as I ~~listened~~ ^{listened} to a bunch of parents glibly expounding

on the supposed importance of not being one's child's friend, about how "it's not about what (the kids) want, and how they frequently push and withhold loving approval from their ostensibly underperforming eight year olds. It occurs to me that every time some deeply disaffected young man finally blows a gasket and shoots up a school (as our news media have so effectively taught him to do), we expend a great deal of energy in the collective good-citizen-theatre of gnashing our teeth and peering through the windows of his childhood home to try and find explanations for such ~~destructive~~^{destructive} impulses... but I suspect we're almost certainly looking in the wrong place. When young people kill their classmates en masse, the source of the anger that drives them to murder is probably much less likely to be found in their own homes than in the family environments of their victims; environments where demanding parents push their kids to embrace and perpetuate a zero-sum understanding of life, where youth are taught that if they aren't winners then they're losers, and losers' lives aren't valuable so they can be treated just about any way the winners choose.

Of course, even these more culpable parents, the Tiger Mans and Helicopter Dads, aren't themselves the REAL problem, either. From where I sit, they're victims too, victims of the social organization and institutions that manipulate people like them — like all of us — into raising children who will one day function superbly as tools for our anti-cooperative, hyper-competitive, profit-driven consumer culture, thriving (they hope, but more likely just surviving) at the expense of the many who must lose in order for a few to win. And, if a handful of these parents' own dead kids constitute the price tag of American economic exceptionalism, well... so be it, says the power structure (but only just out of earshot of the grieving masses, of course.)

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