

PRACTICE UNIT TEST ENG 4U1

GROUNDED IN SOMETHING: THE ROLE OF SELF-ESTEEM IN HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION

My friend's daughter recently brought home a painting from her Saturday morning art class. My immediate reaction was to assume that the child's lunch pail had exploded in her knapsack, but my friend's reaction was to immediately take that monstrosity and hang it on the refrigerator. In fact, the art teacher had not only included a hand-drawn gold star, but another sticker that read "ONE IN A MILLION!" I couldn't help but wonder what kind of treasure chest would be opened the day the paint stayed between the lines.

Western culture as it exists today is one that has come to accept mediocrity. Children in particular are no longer pushed to greatness, perhaps out of fear the child will rebel, perhaps because the child's feelings will be hurt, or perhaps because being average has simply become the norm.

This development is relatively new. In the early 1980s, child psychologists discovered that many children were withdrawing when they were confronted with activities that they failed at. The solution, therefore, was to suggest that children needed to be affirmed more often and more regularly. This lead to the creation of what is now called "self-esteem."

The fundamental ideology behind self-esteem is good: that an individual will feel a strong sense of self worth when he or she accomplishes something significant. The reality, however, is that self-esteem soon became an excuse for every withdrawn child, every challenge that wasn't risen to, and every mediocre performance given. The problem, therefore, became that self-esteem was grounded in

nothing (or, in most cases, nothing more than completion). Children began to realize that if they pouted enough, or showed fear in any regard, or threatened to quit altogether, they would be re-affirmed. Sometimes with a gold star. Sometimes with words of affirmation. But, more often than not, these children were simply provided a path with a little less resistance.

But promises of self-esteem grounded in nothing only last so long. A youngster who is told he is one-in-a-million soon learns the hard way that this is true when he realizes that everyone else is staying in the lines, and he doesn't know how.

I am not so old or so callused to say that children do not need affirmation. But, without question, I am maintaining this: self-esteem has to be grounded in something.

As a teacher, I have realized that most of my students ground their sense of self-worth in something measurable: a certain percentage or being selected for a certain team. Rightly so, my students feel a deep sense of accomplishment when they meet this kind of success. A genuinely engaged student will feel pain, therefore, when he or she receives a 79%, or is only selected as an alternate.

But more often than I would like to see, this often results in my students looking for someone to blame. They come to believe that the material was not presented clearly enough, that it was too challenging, or that my expectations are simply too unreasonable. And sometimes—especially when they really had their hearts set on a particular mark—it can become quite uncomfortable for everyone.

And that's when my students need to remember something that many of us have forgotten: it only feels good if it was truly your best.

Because your best, ladies and gentleman, is all that you can ever give. I have watched many of you give your best this semester. I have seen you agonize over the words and sentences and paragraphs on your page. I have seen your frustration and your annoyance and your disappointment at receiving a disappointing mark. But what I haven't seen is how you responded to that pain in the privacy of your own heart.

Because it is in that place where you will know how you responded.

Did you become angry and upset?
Did you begin counting the days?
Did you have jealousy about another class' workload?
Did you take short cuts?
Did you settle for mediocrity?

Or did you simply look inside your self and ask if there was anything left to give?

The way this all ends is really quite simple. You either gave your best, or you found an excuse not to.

But know this, those who do give their best can live with it. They do become the elite of our society, the one-in-a-million. They are the ones whose work I would happily hang on the refrigerator.

Questions

1. What historical and social developments led to the invention of "self-esteem"? (3)
2. Identify the speaker's audience. How do you know this speech is addressed to that particular audience? (3)
3. In your own words, explain the author's thesis. Is it implicit or explicit? What is the overall purpose of this speech? (4)
4. Describe the tone of the speech. Make references to specific diction to explain how this creates tone. (2)
5. Identify three rhetorical or stylistic devices used in this speech and explain how each enriches the author's purpose. (6)
6. Which of the three Aristotelian appeals does the author use most effectively? Be sure to give specific textual examples to support your position. (4)
7. Write a letter to the speaker from the perspective of a parent (perhaps from the same parent who hung the artwork on the refrigerator). Justify your actions. (8)