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Imitation, Economic Insecurity, and Risk Aversion

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There is an ingrained notion in American culture that *individuals* are responsible for their circumstances. In the Great Depression, people blamed themselves for unemployment, as if somehow their personal character flaws, rather than a breakdown of the national economy, had caused them to be laid off. At a visceral level, Americans reject the idea that they are in the grip of vast forces beyond their control.

I note this because, when I ask students why so many of their honors peers underperform academically and seem shy about undertaking intellectual adventures, they *always* reply that it's because their fellow students are "lazy." One great merit of Digby's "The Age of Imitation" is that it offers a cultural, not a moral, explanation for this kind of behavior. But Digby's description of the present moment in cultural history offers little by way of an account of how we came to it. I want to offer some suggestions in that direction.

I begin with another snapshot. The February 21st issue of *Time* featured a cover story on "What Teachers Hate About Parents." The story highlighted the extraordinary increase in the rate of parental interventions on behalf of their kids—not just inquiries about how they're doing, but attacks on the very idea that Junior could be anything but a stellar performer. Or consider Patrick Allitt, the Emory historian, in his delightful *I'm the Teacher, You're the Student*: Allitt reports that parents frequently call Emory faculty to complain that they aren't paying tens of thousands of dollars in tuition for Cs (let alone Ds or Fs). For these parents, the problem is not their son or daughter's performance, but the grade assigned to that performance. Many parents expect "success," not achievement.

There have always been overprotective parents, and mistaking marks of success for real achievement is an age-old problem. What seems to have changed is the degree. With so many parents behaving this way, we have a generation of young people often shielded from the consequences of their own mis-performance, inexperienced at fighting their own battles, who have, as a consequence, less occasion to learn from mistakes, less skill in dealing with relative failure, fewer occasions to confront their limitations, and less reason to take responsibility for themselves. These unlearned lessons make it harder for students to do what we expect of honors students. Without the requisite skills of maturity, talented students can only see an honors thesis as a mountain impossible to climb, and even honors coursework as too demanding. Aggressive, overprotective parents do their sons and daughters no favors.

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But I doubt that overprotective parents are the nub of the problem, however much they contribute to their children's retarded academic development. Protectiveness is a response to perceived risk or danger. If a whole generation of parents has become highly protective of their kids, it is likely that they have done so in reaction to changing life circumstances and not that a whole generation has, individual by individual, lost their moral compass where child rearing is concerned. So, what has changed? Many commentators have remarked that ours is a risk-averse society. That may explain obsessive interest in child car seats or helmets for bike riders, but how does it explain the attitudes reported by *Time*? If we believe the reports, parents of many school children are overprotective of *success*.

I think some demographic trends are instructive here. Today, a majority of American kids live through a divorce in their pre-college years; a large portion of American kids grow up with only one parent; and, as average family size shrinks, a much higher proportion of kids are "only children." Divorce leaves many kids emotionally damaged or vulnerable, and it very often leaves the custodial parent struggling economically. Children of single parents, on average, suffer from various disabilities: poor parental supervision if a parent is working two jobs to make ends meet or has several children to deal with, lack of a gender role model in the home, and economic difficulties, to name only the most obvious. And the only child not only lacks siblings to test him or herself against but is notoriously the most likely to have overprotective parents. A disproportionate share of school children are "underprivileged"; a much higher percent of children than of the population at large is below the poverty line; children of immigrants, legal and illegal, form a much higher percent of the school-age population than immigrants represent in the total population.

All of these factors tend to leave a young person "at risk." For the poor child, the basic necessities of life may be lacking or sub-standard; for children of divorce, even when economic problems do not arise, there are often emotional scars; racism retards the development of children from some backgrounds. Even "privileged" children with two parents often pay for their advantages: overprotective parents retard the child's development, and a too-privileged upbringing all too easily leads to a sense of entitlement that defies the principle that everything worthwhile in education needs to be earned the old-fashioned way, by hard work.

Looming over these varied family situations is economic insecurity. Most one-earner families face it. And in the 1990s, working-class and lower-middle-class families faced it as the 90s boom lifted the incomes of upper-middle-class and wealthy families but left others stagnant or declining. Today, these same income groups are the most likely to face rising health care and educational costs as employers cut benefits, and they are the most threatened by job out-sourcing.

How do families facing economic insecurity, or other disabilities, view the prospects of a very talented son or daughter? I suggest that the *rational* response is to make sure that the kid doesn't blow the opportunity his or her talent represents. What does that mean? When one's parents are mired in a dead-end situation, "opportunity" means, I think, choosing the "sure thing" instead of the dream, seeking an education for success, not for enlightenment, and, above all, not making "mistakes." "Security" becomes an over-riding consideration and risk management not just a

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tactic but a life-philosophy. When universities face budget cuts, faculty draw back from adventurous projects and focus on primary goals and well-trod paths. They look after themselves first, working to improve their vitas, growing anxious about course enrollment, and worrying about their teaching evaluations. Anxious, insecure faculty are not the ones who delve into new fields of inquiry or take on adventurous research projects with no guarantees of success. Our students behave no differently.

For a number of years, our program recruited students through breakout sessions at Freshman Orientation. One year, we experimented with the two halves of our message, the appeal to intellectual adventure and academic challenge on the one hand, and the program's "safety net" of services and support on the other. We discovered that the "adventure" message made eyes light up but led to few applications while the "safety" message left eyes dull but won us many applicants. The outcome is only counter-intuitive if you forget the most common life experiences of the current generation and the overarching search for security. Today's students have more riding on "success" than ever before but are often less equipped than former generations to achieve it. (The manifold failures of many public schools are another part of this story.) Their divided souls make sense: their hearts may tug in one direction, but their heads calculate that a different goal is, if not better, then wiser.

There are many reasons for today's students not to be risk takers and not to go out of their way looking for challenges. Many can't afford a "mistake," and others lack the skills to tackle the challenges we would engage them in. In this context, Digby's discovery that students appreciate imitative excellence much more naturally than creativity makes sense. It fits easily with a loss of confidence and a safety-mindedness born of years of stress, retrenchment, and declining prospects. Models fit for imitation are already *proven*; creative expression is a crap shoot. In good times, talented people can't imagine failure; in bad times, survival itself can seem a kind of success. I find my students quail at the thought of criticizing one another. But theirs is not the solidarity of a long march to the promised land. It feels more like people huddling together against the elements (me). If there is a generosity of spirit here, there is also a kind of stultifying self-restraint. Are they afraid of showing up their compatriots or of not showing them up? Is it fellow feeling or self-doubt? I suspect it's both. Even those who haven't been beaten up by circumstances have friends with bruises. The finer spirits among them are sympathetic and surely cannot help but think that, but for a few breaks, there stand I. Ours is not an age of heroes.

I often tell students that they should aspire not just to meet but to set the standards. Joan Digby says my proposition is hardly intelligible to most of my listeners. Maybe she's right. The question is: what does all of this say about how we must teach?

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