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Feeding Your Inner Caligula

by Theodore Dalrymple 

February 17, 2017

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photo credit: Bigstock

Self-love used to be a vice, but nowadays it is the nearest thing to a virtue, as a supposed precondition of our own mental health (whatever that might be).

An Irish friend kindly forwarded me an article from *The Irish Times* reporting on a school in County Dublin that, on St. Valentine's Day, encouraged children to write Valentine cards to themselves. They were supposed to inscribe in them what they loved about themselves, on the theory that self-love is a precondition to success, happiness, and resilience, and should therefore be taught early and probably incessantly.

My view is that the head teacher of the school ought to be given hemlock to drink for corrupting youth, but I accept that some people might think this punishment a little severe. Indeed, there are some people—the author of the article among them, a psychotherapist—who think the promotion of youthful self-satisfaction and conceit an excellent idea, the key to the little ones' future happiness.

I looked up the school's *mission statement* on the internet. Suffice it to say that it contained few surprises, other than the fact that it existed at all. It was the expected dreary catalog of modern pieties, among them the celebration of the uniqueness of the child and respect for diversity of traditions, values, and beliefs, irrespective of the particular nature or content of those traditions, values, and beliefs. As for "celebrating" uniqueness: How is it to be done? By getting the little geniuses to chant "I am unique, you are unique, we are all unique, everyone is unique!" while holding hands and dancing round a tree as the teacher beats the rhythm on a tambourine?

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The tide of cliché has been rising for years, despite (or, as Schopenhauer would no doubt have said, *because of*) the ever-greater proportion of educated persons in the population. It requires a certain level of education, after all, to be able to write the following, taken at random from the article in *The Irish Times*:

“Self-love used to be a vice, but nowadays it is the nearest thing to a virtue.”

Self-esteem matters, and as children are still forming core beliefs about themselves, adults can engage with them to really tune in to that fact.

No person who had left school at the age of 12 could have written such a sentence, which of course is a very powerful argument for reducing, as a preventive measure, the age at which children leave school. No mere ignoramus, no child sent down the mines at the age of 6, could ever have uttered these words, which somehow manage to combine dogmatism with absence of clear meaning.

But let us examine some of the more easily comprehensible, though not necessarily worthwhile, sentiments expressed in the article:

A child who develops such beliefs as “I am kind, I am competent, I am lovable” will likely find themselves [sic] on a path to good self-esteem. A child who, on the other hand, develops more negative beliefs about himself, such as “I have no talent, I am not liked by others” will likely have lower self-esteem and this can affect their [sic] mental health.

What is most remarkable about this is that neither here nor elsewhere in the article does the author think it necessary for there to be some objective correlative of the belief. That is to say, it is perfectly in order for the child to have a belief about himself that is completely unrelated to any of his conduct. According to this view of the matter, a child can, and indeed ought to, remind himself that he is kind while he is pulling the legs and wings off a fly or throwing stones through an old lady's front window. As angels to wanton boys are we to the psychologists.

Criminals, especially the vicious rather than the merely pathetic ones, have very high self-esteem. They are generally proud of how awful they have been and positively swagger with satisfaction at their own competence in the matter of causing misery to others. They too have “core beliefs” about themselves, all of them highly flattering. They even think they are lovable as well as admirable.

The author wasn't just having an off day such as we all

the same journal just before Christmas last year:



There has been a lot of talk lately, at a national, local and personal level, about the importance of putting mental health front and centre.

Therefore, as the Christmas season approaches, during this time of gift-giving, we have an opportunity to focus on what we can gift to ourselves, in order to impact in a positive way on our mental health.

And what is the gift we can give ourselves? “Living life authentically, getting in tune with our true sense of how we wish to be in this world.” And what if what we really, truly, and authentically wish to be is Caligula? Well, “research” (before which we must all bow down and worship) shows that “when we are authentic...even if it sets up to be different from others, it still correlates with increased levels of joy and wellbeing.” Oh, happy, happy Caligula!

When reading this kind of saccharine psychological bilge, I feel rather (though not exactly) as I do after having eaten too many chocolate truffles at a sitting. Alternatively, one might call the thoughts of the author of the articles *psychological kitsch*. Kitsch is hard to define but easy to recognize: It is a kind of sentimental garishness approximating or imitating, but not attaining, art. These articles are conspicuously sentimental, written with something approximating or imitating, but not attaining, thought.

I asked a fishmonger what he thought of the idea of children sending themselves Valentine cards inscribed with what they loved about themselves.

“Valentine’s Day is bad enough,” he said, “without bringing children into it.”

Now, that’s what I call a genuine thought.



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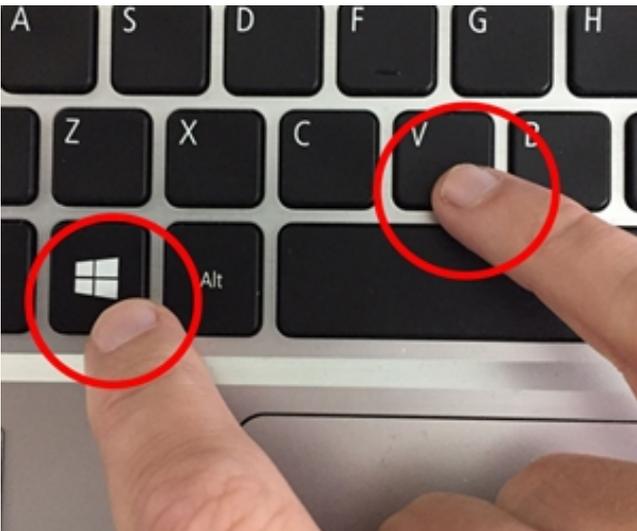
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SabrinaVanZant · 9 days ago

Ah, it's nice and quiet over here. No trolls, no people posting under multiple names, and no super-long threads with responses to trolls and people posting under multiple names.

19 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

ShermanLogan → SabrinaVanZant · 9 days ago

Don't they ever get tired?

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

SabrinaVanZant → ShermanLogan · 9 days ago

It's getting to be like Breitbart.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

This comment was deleted.

SabrinaVanZant → Guest · 9 days ago

((Clara/PoundCake/Mandalay))), your projection is astounding.

8 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

M Aurelius → SabrinaVanZant · 8 days ago

Bingo!

As the the end of every month approaches, JJ's medication fails, or some other cyclical pathology manifests itself.

It's like clockwork.

Then the vile, boorish, ill-bred storm blows over, and another pleasant persona suddenly appears, only to have The Portrait Of Dorian Gray reveal itself over the ensuing weeks.

10 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

SabrinaVanZant → M Aurelius · 8 days ago

That's a hilarious analogy! I don't mind JJ so much, as he is a regular fixture and it's easy to spot him when he resurfaces. It's these "other" ones who switch accounts...

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t

M Aurelius → SabrinaVanZant
• 8 days ago

JJ is like searching for Easter eggs.
A sort of morbid fascination here.
But when you find one, it contains
not a treat, but an unhappiness.
8 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

SabrinaVanZant → M Aurelius
• 8 days ago

Like biting into a chocolate chip
cookie only to find out that it's
oatmeal raisin.
5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

M Aurelius → SabrinaVanZant
• 8 days ago

.....Or carob flax seed..
(crosses self)
4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

AngryFarmer → SabrinaVanZant
• 8 days ago

More like oatmeal / rat turd.
2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Rurik → M Aurelius · 8 days ago

A mental hemorrhoid.
3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

RebelWriter1960 ✓Deplorable →
M Aurelius · 8 days ago

I admit JJS seems to occasionally
jump the garden fence, so to speak,
but he's often intelligent and
insightful, and has had some
valuable and interesting comments.
These others that Sabrina refers to
are blocked by me already.
6 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

S. Bishop → SabrinaVanZant
• 8 days ago

Could it be? Could it be he is just
having his 'time of the month?'
Perhaps we should check with
Sandra Fluke...
^ | v · Reply · Share ›

AngryFarmer → M Aurelius
• 8 days ago

JJ seems to be able to hold one of his
personas for between 3 and 6 posts.
At that point, his verbal ties begin to
leak through, and he'll begin to rant
about his engineering degrees, or
how stupid "right-wingers" are or
something. These others, such as the
black fellow yesterday or the
"Muslim" the day before appear to be
a new phenomenon, perhaps related
to Ms. Clinton putting "our kind" on
the map when she needed an
electoral scapegoat. I wonder if
Disqus allows for "invitation only"
commenting.
10 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

9eyedeel → AngryFarmer
• 8 days ago

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?...>

"Meridian man's pet squirrel goes nuts on burglar"

#NotAllSquirrels

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Cuck Me Pumps →

SabrinaVanZant · 8 days ago

Oh, Pound Cuck.. hahaha.

What's the latest incucknation?

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

SabrinaVanZant → Cuck Me

Pumps · 8 days ago

Look above: Andre Kenchenko.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Cuck Me Pumps →

SabrinaVanZant · 8 days ago

Mother! Blood! Blood!

I'm still in "Psycho" mode from earlier on. Hehe

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Mnestheus → Guest · 8 days ago

Because Takimag's usual trollhounds , especially the vicious rather than merely pathetic ones, have very high self-esteem, they are generally proud of how awful they have been and positively swagger with satisfaction at their own competence in the matter of causing misery. Central to their self-flattery is the delusional belief that reciprocal upvoting makes them lovable as well as admirable.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Boris Badenov → Mnestheus

· 8 days ago

So.

9 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Mosley → Boris Badenov

· 7 days ago

Upvote!

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

M Aurelius → Mnestheus

· 8 days ago

(I did not upvote this)

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Mosley → M Aurelius · 7 days ago

I upvoted yours! I found it lovable and admirable :)

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

M Aurelius → SabrinaVanZant · 8 days ago

...There is one whack-a-mole here...

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

SabrinaVanZant → M Aurelius · 8 days ago

She's like a bad penny.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

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• 8 days ago
 "She" ain't a she....
 2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

SabrinaVanZant → M Aurelius
 • 8 days ago
 Not so sure about that. I've heard the theories, and they are somewhat sound. But I think that only a truly female mind can come up with the crap she writes.
 5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

M Aurelius → SabrinaVanZant
 • 8 days ago
 HAHAHAHAAAA!!
 Maybe "The Blue Collar Bolshie" is a tranny!
 3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

SabrinaVanZant → M Aurelius
 • 8 days ago
 I am picturing a Norman Bates kind of transformation.
 2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

M Aurelius → SabrinaVanZant
 • 8 days ago
 I'm thinking something more sinister...
<http://i.onionstatic.com/avclu...>
 2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

SabrinaVanZant → M Aurelius
 • 8 days ago
 It definitely puts the lotion in the basket.
 8 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

M Aurelius → SabrinaVanZant
 • 8 days ago
 ...or it get's the hose(ing)
 4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

AngryFarmer → M Aurelius
 • 8 days ago
 Would you troll me?
 I'd troll me.
 6 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

M Aurelius → AngryFarmer
 • 8 days ago
 HAHAHAHAAAAHAHAHA!!!!
 ..isn't he a big fat person?
 1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Boris_baiter → M Aurelius
 • 8 days ago
 What the heck is that?
 1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

M Aurelius → Boris_baiter
 • 8 days ago
 "Buffalo Bill" from "Silence Of The Lambs."
 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Cuck Me Pumps → SabrinaVanZant
 • 8 days ago
 As if I could do anything but just sit

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