

Comparison is the Thief of Joy

In a final meeting with an academic advisee just before her graduation, Sally (not her real name) lamented that she did not have as many noteworthy accomplishments as her peers. She cited organizations they had founded, honors and accolades they had been awarded, service projects they had spearheaded, and so on. In a recent conversation with her mother, Sally had expressed her disappointment in herself, but her mother reminded her, "Comparison is the thief of joy." I was so affected by that profound statement that I paused our meeting long enough to scribble it on a piece of paper. Later I discovered this quote was attributed to Theodore Roosevelt.

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Our culture is constantly forcing comparisons. Who is the fastest? Who is the best? Who is first? Who has the most money, possessions, influence, degrees, awards? Who has the highest grades, the most impressive credentials, the longest resume, the finest pedigree, the greatest notoriety? Like Sally, most of us will be disappointed when we compare ourselves to others.

What purpose does comparison serve? It allows us to sort, to rank. Sometimes the anticipation of comparison can motivate us to do our best, to try harder, to be persistent, to achieve more than we otherwise might. But what if our best is unimpressive by comparison?

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When my grandson JJ was six years old, he had his first season of flag football! Multiple practices sessions were followed by six games. We adults kept score as we watched from the edge of our bleacher seats. Meanwhile, those young players seemed to be having fun just romping around. JJ showed no interest in which team had the most points when time expired.

Wrestling season followed football season. JJ went to several wrestling practices which culminated in an exhibition match attended by parents, relatives, and friends. Members of the high school wrestling team served as referees. The event showcased the techniques these youngsters had learned during those few instructional sessions. Points were awarded for take downs and escapes.

Coaches arranged the pairings to match opponents based on similar size and ability. Of course, I was most attentive when JJ and his partner (opponent?) were called to the center of the mat. The boys assumed the universal wrestler's crouch, shook hands (JJ's favorite part, according to his mother), and waited for the ref to signal the start. After several minutes of tussling and squirming, rolling and lunging, time was called. In accordance with tradition, the referee held each wrestler by the wrist as they faced the bleachers. He raised the arm of JJ's opponent as an indication of victory. JJ didn't seem to mind at all. The crowd applauded. Those two boys joyfully skipped arm in arm to the far side of the gym where they continued roughhousing as others took their turns on center stage. It apparently didn't matter to JJ that his partner had scored more points. It didn't matter that he had "lost." What mattered most, as his mother stated so simply, was that JJ had a good time! Serious comparison would have diminished that innocent joy of competing for fun.

Parenthetically, I would have been pleased if JJ had been victorious, but he had been paired with the wrestling coach's son, so I didn't expect a win or a pin.

I want my grandson and granddaughter to take sports seriously, to focus, to listen to good coaching, to use good technique, and to do their best. More importantly, I want them to enjoy themselves and not expect so much of themselves or their teammates that competition becomes excessively stressful and unpleasant.

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Have you ever disagreed with judges' scoring of Olympic events such as figure skating or diving or gymnastics? Since most of us don't have the trained eye or the expertise to discern slight differences in execution of athletic performance that approaches the limits of human ability, we rely on judges to determine which athletes are the best and which are deemed worthy of second and third place. Why are we obsessed with first place, especially since the difference between first and second place in some of these events is imperceptible, perhaps only in tenths or hundredths of a point or second, and in some cases even the analysis of a "photo finish" seems inconclusive? Unless they "win," such comparison prevents contestants from experiencing their fullest joy. Instead of ranking numerically or awarding gold, silver, and bronze, what if contestants were simply categorized

based on their performance. Would it be terrible if several individuals were recognized as achieving the highest level?

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I was always encouraged to do my best, to try hard, to aspire for excellence, to persist, to not be satisfied with being ordinary, and to exploit my talents and gifts. “Be all you can be!” was one of the recruitment slogans for the Army. Essentially, that’s the unspoken encouragement I’ve given during hundreds of advising sessions spanning 35 years of college professing, and advice I’ll continue to provide to my adult children and my grandchildren, but I prefer accomplishments to be assessed relative to an internal standard, by attempts to do the best they can with what they have under the circumstances.

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“What’s your favorite color? What’s your favorite song or movie? What was the best part of a trip you took? Who is your best friend? Who is your favorite team or player? What’s the best meal you ever had? Which is your favorite holiday?” Answering questions like these requires one to consider an inventory of options, compare them according to some criteria (which is often difficult to articulate) and ultimately provide one answer. I’ve come to dislike questions like these that force me to rank my choices. For example, I like red motorcycles. I prefer blue skies with orange sunsets. Garishly intense yellow paint on a ’32 Ford Deuce Coupe would be my choice. There is no way I can discern one song or one movie or one backpacking trail from those on my lists of favorites. My choice would depend on the situation or my mood. In these situations, comparison can be a source of joy as I consider numerous pleasant possibilities, or a source of stress if I’m pressed into choosing one!

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I agree with those who say that seeking to be the best motivates the greatest effort and elevates achievement. But I’m also convinced that comparison can be the thief of joy.

GR Davis Jr.

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