

Making Modern Toughness

By David Brooks



Credit Damon Winter/The New York Times

When I ask veteran college teachers and administrators to describe how college students have changed over the years, I often get an answer like this: “Today’s students are more accomplished than past generations, but they are also more emotionally fragile.”

That rings true to me. Today’s students are amazing, but they bathe one another in oceans of affirmation and praise, as if buttressing one another against some insecurity. Whatever one thinks of the campus protests, the desire for trigger warnings and safe spaces does seem to emanate from a place of emotional fragility.

And if you hang around the middle aged, you hear a common story line to explain the rise of the orchid generation. Once upon a time, the story line goes, kids were raised in a tough environment. They had to do hard manual chores around the house and they got in fights on the playground. Then they went off to do grueling work in the factory or they learned toughness and grit in the military.

But today, helicopter parents protect their children from setbacks and hardship. They supervise every playground conflict, so kids never learn to handle disputes or deal with pain.

There's a lot of truth to that narrative, but let's not be too nostalgic for the past. A lot of what we take to be the toughness of the past was really just callousness. There was a greater tendency in years gone by to wall off emotions, to put on a thick skin — for some men to be stone-like and uncommunicative and for some women to be brittle, brassy and untouchable.

And then many people turned to alcohol to help them feel anything at all.

Perhaps it's time to rethink toughness or at least detach it from hardness. Being emotionally resilient is not some defensive posture. It's not having some armor surrounding you so that nothing can hurt you.

The people we admire for being resilient are not hard; they are ardent. They have a fervent commitment to some cause, some ideal or some relationship. That higher yearning enables them to withstand setbacks, pain and betrayal.

Such people are, as they say in the martial arts world, strong like water. A blow might sink into them, and when it does they are profoundly affected by it. But they can absorb the blow because it's short term while their natural shape is long term.

There are moments when they feel swallowed up by fear. They feel and live in the pain. But they work through it and their ardent yearning is still there, and they return to an altered wholeness.

In this way of thinking, grit, resilience and toughness are not traits that people possess intrinsically. They are not tools you can possess independently for the sake of themselves. They are means inspired by an end.

John R. Lewis may not have been intrinsically tough, but he was tough in the name of civil rights. Mother Teresa may not have been intrinsically steadfast, but she was steadfast in the name of God. The people around us may not be remorselessly gritty, but they can be that when it comes to protecting their loved ones, when it comes to some dream for their future self.

People are much stronger than they think they are when in pursuit of their telos, their purpose for living. As Nietzsche put it, "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."

In short, emotional fragility is not only caused by overprotective parenting. It's also caused by anything that makes it harder for people to find their telos. It's caused by the culture of modern psychology, which sometimes tries to talk about psychological traits in isolation from moral purposes. It's caused by the ethos of the modern university, which in the name of "critical thinking" encourages students to be detached and corrosively

skeptical. It's caused by the status code of modern meritocracy, which encourages people to pursue success symbols that they don't actually desire.

We are all fragile when we don't know what our purpose is, when we haven't thrown ourselves with abandon into a social role, when we haven't committed ourselves to certain people, when we feel like a swimmer in an ocean with no edge.

If you really want people to be tough, make them idealistic for some cause, make them tender for some other person, make them committed to some worldview that puts today's temporary pain in the context of a larger hope.

Emotional fragility seems like a psychological problem, but it has only a philosophical answer. People are really tough only after they have taken a leap of faith for some truth or mission or love. Once they've done that they can withstand a lot.

We live in an age when it's considered sophisticated to be disenchanting. But people who are enchanted are the real tough cookies.

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