

Barbara Kay on society's propensity to submit to the narcissistic impulse

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I laughed out loud when I read my colleague George Jonas' Saturday column.

Background: Every year-end, newspaper columnists are asked to submit what they think are their best (or most thematically representative) columns for a shot at an industry award.

This year, an editor instructed me to provide a cover letter in which we were to inform the judges how our columns "inform, engage, persuade, educate, entertain," why we considered our opinions to be "well-reasoned," and to explain how our work spurred "readers' responses or debate."

In Jonas' words, we were to provide a "sales pitch" on why our particular work deserved an award. Jonas wrote: "Maybe it's generational, but I can't pitch myself for an award."

I laughed because just the day before, I had sent in a few 2012 columns I was proud to have written, but with the caveat, "I am not writing an accompanying letter about why I am so worthy of an award, because it sticks in the craw."

Yes, George, it is a "generational" thing. We both grew up in the days before self-promotion was a social norm: Before the "Me" decade (the 1970s), before Oprah, before MySpace, Facebook and Twitter, before Time magazine made "You" the Person of the Year, and (thank God) before the publication of Diane Mastromarino's 2003 book, *The Girl's Guide to Loving Yourself*: a book about falling in love with the one person who matters most ... You (in which can be found this priceless pearl of advice: "Loving yourself means knowing how great you are and not letting any person, any place, or any thing ever get in the way of that." Echh).

I know it can be a tiresome habit for older people to gripe about the self-centredness of today's youth and romanticize the virtues of yesteryear's parenting. But it is a fact, not my imagination, that our culture has become steadily more narcissistic since the concepts of character-building and objective standards of excellence fell by the wayside, steam-rollered by our obsession with "feelings" and (unearned) self-esteem.

As far back as 1979, when his exploration of the phenomenon, *The Culture of Narcissism*, was published, formidable social-critic Christopher Lasch could see that psychiatry's imperialist appropriation of child-rearing was creating "a state of superimposed anxiety" on parents. Instructed that they must do nothing to hamper their children's self-esteem and freedom, parents were robbed of their confidence in imposing rules and boundaries.

Fortunately for me, Dr. Spock (my copy of his book *Baby and Child Care* was in tatters by the time I was finished consulting it) and Hilda Bruch, author of *Don't Be Afraid of Your Child* (1957), were still spokespeople for a more traditional school of parenting. I'm happy for that. I'm temperamentally unsuited to the "authenticity" school of child-rearing, in which "all feelings are legitimate," and it is more important for children to express how they feel than to learn how to spell.

Some groups have resisted the trend toward obsessing over self-

esteem — including the religious, and certain immigrant cultures. This includes many East Asians. Tiger Mom author Amy Chua takes an extreme position, but her instinct to combat the general culture's encouragement of unearned self-esteem is spot on.

I wasn't a Tiger Mom, but I was quite tough on my children. I remember my son asking me to look over an essay he'd written in high school. I have a very clear memory of saying to him, "This is crap. It looks like you wrote it in half an hour. And from the style and tone of this paragraph" — I see myself sternly jabbing at it — "you no doubt ripped this off from some magazine. Am I right?" Mortified, head low, he shuffled out of the room.

He knew I was correct. Still, the response was overkill, even for me, I thought. I'd squashed his ego and his confidence. He'd hate critical writing from then on.

Happy ending, I'm pleased to report. The next day, he presented me with a new, carefully crafted and thoughtfully reasoned essay.

He ended up as a professional writer and editor. And so I'd conclude, based on this one admittedly anecdotal data point, that the tough-love school is better than the current approach — one that finds nothing odd about the solicitation of cover letters to judges explaining, without a smidgen of shame or embarrassment, why one is God's gift to journalism.

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bkay@videotron.ca