

The Simon Legree school of parenting

Thursday January 13th, 2011

I attended a public high school in Toronto whose population was virtually all Jewish. The scholastic achievements of the school vis a vis other Ontario high schools was so remarkable (by my rough estimation, about 90% of our high school population went on to university at a time when about 15% of the general population did) that a sociologist wrote a book about it (Crestwood Heights, a gauzily disguised version of the real name, Forest Hill).

What explains the disparity? Culture. When my older sister, a top student, would come home and tell our parents she got 95% on a test, my father wouldn't say, "Oh, my brilliant child, how fabulous you are," he would say, "What did Lorrie Capp and Syd Goldenberg get?" They were the recognized geniuses of her class. Naturally they had gotten 97% and 98%.

My parents were proud of her, but she got the message: They would be even prouder if she beat Lorrie and Syd.

I was reminded of my own culture's obsession with educational achievement when I read about the child-rearing methods revealed by Yale Law professor Amy Chua in her new book, *Battle Hymns of the Tiger Mother*.

According to Ms Chua-- and let us hope she is exaggerating for the sake of humour, attention and book sales-- she brought up her two daughters, Louisa and Sophia with a draconian code of discipline that would have gladdened the heart of Simon Legree.

Ms. Chua blithely gives the finger to the "self-esteem" school of child-rearing that dominates Western society, claiming that the surest route to children's success is through the "Chinese mother" school of oppression. Under the rubric of Chinese mother, she includes any ethnicity in which educational milestones, high achievement and obedience to parents are so highly prized that they are privileged over and above all other childish needs and desires.

Her two girls were subjected to a regime of study and music drills that many westerners will consider outright child abuse. Ms Chua proudly recounts one incident that ended in her daughter's triumph, but could just as easily have ended on a psychiatrist's couch, or so many Western readers will believe. When Louisa was 7, she was having difficulty with a piano piece, because the two hands have to keep a different rhythm. Numerous drills did not prove successful. Louisa announced she was giving up. Ms Chua ordered her back to the piano. "You can't make me," said Louisa. "Oh yes, I can," said her mother.

"Back at the piano, Lulu made me pay," Ms. Chua writes. "She punched, thrashed and kicked. She grabbed the music score and tore it to shreds. I taped the score back together and encased it in a plastic shield so that it could never be destroyed again...I threatened her with no lunch, no dinner, no Christmas or Hanukkah presents, no birthday parties for two, three, four years. When she still kept playing it wrong, I told her she was purposely working herself into a frenzy because she was secretly afraid she couldn't do it. I told her to stop being lazy, cowardly, self-indulgent and pathetic."

When her husband tells Ms. Chua to stop "insulting" their daughter, Ms. Chua explains she was only "motivating" her.

Behind Ms. Chua's behaviour -- and say what you will, it produced two apparently lovely, successful daughters who claim to appreciate their mother's approach -- lies a philosophy of family honour at odds with normative Western beliefs. According to Ms Chua, shaming children is acceptable because they are capable of high achievement, always the result of hard work. More important, Chinese children are seen as indebted to their parents; Westerners see themselves as duty-bound to serve their children's needs. "This strikes me as a terrible deal for the Western parent," says Ms Chua.

Coincidentally, the National Post's article about Ms. Chua appeared in the same edition as Dan Gardner's column, "From Haiti to Harvard, culture matters," bolstering the idea that culture is the single greatest predictor for academic success. He is right, of course, even though political correctness forbids us to say so, and even though Ms. Chua's extreme methods actually are unnecessary, as the Jewish experience -- high expectations, high sensitivity to children's psychic needs-- proves.

It's too bad Ms. Chua's extremism will become the focus of public interest. The larger issue is worthy of respectful attention. As Gardner notes, the reason Asian students are so wildly disproportionately represented in elite American universities (3% of the population, about 25% on campus) is because they came from homes in which "Chinese mothers" ruled the roost. It isn't racism to say so.

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