

Two Views of Struggle: East Vs West

Brightside February, 2013

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A REPORT ON: THE STRUGGLE FOR SMARTS (NPR.ORG, 11/12/2012)

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2012/11/12/164793058/struggle-for-smarts-how-eastern-and-western-cultures-tackle-learning>

(Last month, the article I intended to write was high-jacked by my struggles when returning to school after almost 20 years. The original impetus to write on the subject of struggle is before you below)

A young boy in Japan cannot draw a three-dimensional cube during his math class. Though he tries, he cannot do it. He is invited up to the blackboard by his teacher in front of the entire class. The boy tries and tries to get the drawing right. He is not fed the answer by his teacher or classmates. He does not cry, but rather persists in his efforts. An American observer (a psychologist) in the classroom witnessing all this begins to literally sweat and squirm in his seat, so uncomfortable is he for the young, persistent Japanese. Finally, and though it takes time, the child finally succeeds in drawing the cube correctly and proudly returns to his seat, to the approval of his teacher and the applause of his peers.

In Taiwan, a young boy has won 1st place in a piano competition. His mother says to him: “You practiced and practiced with lots of energy; it really got hard, but you made great effort. You insisted yourself on practicing”.

12,000 miles across the world, a smart young American boy tells his mother he and some friends talked about a Harriet Tubman book and how much they like reading. They do this all the time, he says, even during recess. His mother says, “That’s what smart people do. Did you know that? They talk about books”. The vacuousness of the mother’s response should take your breath away. It did mine.

The implications and consequences of *how* we approach struggle are profound, not only affecting individual self-image but also shaping the character of a culture. Does struggle indicate intellectual weakness or a sign of mental strength? A rite of passage to growth? A prerequisite to becoming better?

In another study, an impossible math problem is assigned to first grade students who are then observed for how long they persist in working on it. The American children worked on the problem an average of thirty seconds and then quit, saying, “We’ve never had this”, as they tossed it off. The Japanese children worked and worked on the problem for an hour and finally had to be stopped.

Are any of you feeling alarmed? Ashamed? Does this explain a few things we observe around us?

I’m angry. This is not the America I grew up in. I don’t know exactly what forces have softened our resolve and weakened our spirits. I am sure they are many and operate on many levels but, regardless of the causes, it is up to all of us who have it in them to maintain the strong cultural standards that have made, and will in the future ensure, our place as a great Nation.

Dr. Derek Conte is co-founder of Chiropractic Specialists on Concord Rd. in Smyrna, and is available to speak to your group. Please visit: drderekconte.com for practice info, archives of past articles and photos of mission trips to Tibet, China and the Dominican Republic.