

## **Judgment Days**

**By**

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Sociologists at the University of Michigan recently published the results of a three-decade-long study that assessed college students' capacity for empathy. They concluded that the ability of students to identify with and understand the feelings of others was in shorter supply than it had been thirty years ago. The sociologists and psychologists who reviewed the research data cited the numbing effect of violent entertainment media and the distancing inherent in online relationships as contributors to this decline. Although it was not specifically mentioned in the reports I read about the study, I suspect that "reality television" also plays a role. It doesn't seem to matter whether singing, dancing, interior design, or ghost-hunting is being showcased. The themes that draw almost all of these programs together are competitiveness and judgment. No episode is complete without someone being voted off the island. Every day is Judgment Day.

The human capacity for harsh judgment of our fellows was not invented by Simon Cowell, nor is its exercise limited to "American Idol." Yet today's television offers its wide variety of "blood sport" programming to far larger audiences than ever filled a Roman arena. Granted, modern contestants face no worse fate than being "fired" or voted off the show. We have not yet come to the place where the loser forfeits his or her life, but there is something unsettling in its resonance with the Roman arena about judges who turn their thumbs down and spectators who cheer the humiliation of the vanquished.

"Reality television" is a mirror that reflects a hyper-competitive and judgmental society. This win-or-lose mentality also may be seen in our workplaces and schools, where huge amounts of time, money,

and energy are expended in appraising, testing, and judging the performance of employees and students. We organize sports programs for children in which an emphasis on performance and a “winning is everything” ideal so poison the atmosphere that kids are reduced to tears and parents engage in fistcuffs on the sidelines. A culture that relies upon threats, terror, and humiliation to create “winners” truly should be under judgment. No pleasure ought to be derived from labeling another human being as deficient. Healthy self-esteem cannot be fostered by dismissing others as losers. Something is out of kilter when much of our “entertainment” focuses on winning at any cost, on tearing others down rather than building them up. To the extent that such unhealthy competitiveness and pressure to perform infect the home, workplace, and school it is no wonder that empathy is in decline.

The concerns raised by the University of Michigan study remind us how important it is for parents and caregivers to nurture empathy by teaching young children to recognize, understand, and respond to their own feelings and those of others. Dorothy Law Nolte wrote in 1998, “If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn; if children live with hostility, they learn to fight; if children live with fear, they learn to be apprehensive.” But, “if children live with encouragement, they learn confidence ... if children live with acceptance, they learn to love ... if children live with kindness and consideration, they learn respect.”

Before you sit down with your child to watch some “reality” programming or shout from the sidelines of the next soccer game your encouragement to destroy the opposition, think about the messages that might be conveyed. When it comes to Judgment Day, one should be sufficient.

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