

American Scene



Being the Best

By David Beagan

I have always remembered a story about a dirt-poor Apalachian individual. When asked why he thought he was better than his black neighbors said, "If we can't be better than them, who can we be better than." This stark admission plainly reveals what I think is among the most fundamental aspects of human nature. No, not racism, but something even more fundamental. Everyone has a basic psychological need to be better than someone. And the more people you are better than, the more rewarding it feels.

The existence of this need brings understanding to a variety phenomena of human behavior, and yet I don't ever remember reading or hearing about it as such. I as far as I know, there is no name for this.

It reveals itself in countless little details of life. From Garrison Keillor's tongue in cheek description of Lake Wobegon as a place where, "... all the children are above average" to the highest form of compliment, "he is one of the best players in the world." Remember the license plate, "My kid is an honor student."? Then there were the plates in response, "My kid beat up your honor student" and "my dog is smarter than your honor student."

People say, "What is unique about my story is ..." followed by whatever the speaker thinks makes them special. This is just another way of thinking of oneself as better than others.

In television shows, you routinely see one or more characters who play the stooge. We like that because we know we are smarter than the stooge. We know we are better than the stooge. This brings us comfort and makes us feel good. Apparently, scriptwriters instinctively know this and frequently use it to good advantage to make shows popular.

On the other side of the coin, people react negatively to someone who has an unfounded air of superiority. "You think your better than me," said with a healthy amount of disgust is an oft heard phrase.

This need to be better than someone extends to one's larger social units. I remember seeing a scene in a television program where a grandfather had a heart to heart talk with his granddaughter after she had been in trouble for some bad behavior. He told her, we are Bravermans (family name) we don't act that way. He was invoking family pride of being better than all those families who accept that kind of bad behavior.

Turning to the arena of sports and games, how can we account for their popularity? For most, the act of winning is an arbitrary accomplishment. Winning a ball game,

prevailing in a board game, becoming the champion of anything is not of any intrinsic value. Yet the legendary Vince Lombardi said, "Winning isn't everything, it is the only thing." And Bobby Fischer

famously said on the Dick Cavette show, "I like the moment when I break a man's ego."

Sport is intensely popular because it gives you a chance to chase after the opportunity to beat an opponent demonstrating for a time your superiority. Not only that, but we can vicariously be winners by identifying with our favorite sports team. When our team wins the championship we are not just better than somebody, our team is better than all the others -- a whole city can spontaneously erupt in joyous celebration. The fact that the competition doesn't always pay off with a win, sometimes we lose, just further strengthens the drive to participate because as we know from behavioral conditioning, a behavior that is only sometimes rewarded is most strongly reinforced.

The basis of the most successful economic system ever owes its success to the need to be better than someone. In capitalism we yearn to compete, to win. At the most basic level we work to satisfy the basic needs of food, shelter, and health, but after that capitalism provides a chance to "beat the other guy."

In the United States long struggle with racism, there are certainly many reasons for its dogged persistence. But I think that perhaps the strongest reason for its persistence is that it provides a ready and convenient group for people to feel superior to.

Undoubtedly this drive to be better than others has strong survival value. Throughout the evolution of mankind, this trait was strengthened and reinforced because it drove people to do more to survive. But I can't help but wonder, wouldn't each of us be happier if we could overcome this. If our sense of well being was based more consistently on the simple things in life regardless of how that measures up against someone else?

Montague: So you say you are better than me?

Capulet: In fact, I do.

Montague: You lie!

Shakespeare, "Romeo and Juliet"