

Overcoming the cult of individualism

Saturday, 24 December 2005

by Cameron Smith

At this special time of the year I want to celebrate three remarkable people, each of whom is reshaping the future and enriching the world.

I especially want to celebrate them because they have set out to reclaim the spiritual commons, which has been so sorely trampled by the cult of individualism.

The spiritual commons is where people care for one another. Where society is stitched together by a sense of togetherness, a commitment to mutual well-being.

Unfortunately, the emphasis on individualism has become lopsided, particularly so during the 1980s and 1990s with the concept of the selfish gene developed in 1976 by the British biologist Richard Dawkin. Dawkin maintained that natural selection occurs at the level of genes, and that genes are ruthless and competitive, even deceitful, in their drive to survive and replicate.

To those who prize individualism over all else, this has served as proof that aggressive competition is a natural state of being. They totally ignore Dawkins' plea: "Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish." The selfish gene theory is now being challenged as overly simplistic.

The three people I want to celebrate place caring at the centre of social behaviour. They see it as what we need, more than anything else, for individual fulfillment, and for creating sustainable societies.

The three are the brothers Craig and Marc Kielburger, who have written *Me to We: Turning Self-Help on Its Head* (John Wiley & Sons Canada Ltd, 2004, \$19.99 in paperback), and Mary Gordon, who has written *Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child* (Thomas Allen Publishers, 2005, \$29.95)

The Kielburgers are based in Toronto and work through Free the Children, an aid agency Craig established ten years ago at age twelve, to rescue children from slave labour. The organization has since built more than 400 schools for deprived children around the world.

Placing yourself first all the time is not the way to improve your life, they say. "You find happiness and purpose by reaching out to help others." In their book, they build a powerful case in support of this through anecdotes — both their own, and those written by others, including such celebrities as Desmond Tutu, Richard Gere, Jane Goodall, and Oprah Winfrey. Some of the anecdotes are so powerful they can move you to tears.

Mary Gordon, also of Toronto, is a former kindergarten teacher who offers provocative insights into the forces that shape human behaviour.

All too often, Gordon says, people build fortresses around themselves because, as infants, they never acquired the interpersonal skills needed to navigate this increasingly complex world. What's left to them is dropping out, aggression, self-absorption, indifference, intolerance, and isolation. The consequences for society are not pretty.

She advocates helping children develop empathy, beginning in kindergarten and lasting throughout their years in elementary school. She calls it developing emotional literacy. By empathy she means "the ability to identify with the feelings and perspectives of others . . . and to respond in an appropriate way."

To do this, she invites a parent to bring a baby into a classroom. The first visit is when the baby is two to four months old. There are nine visits — one each month during the the school year.

Before each visit students discuss what they are likely to see. A week later the baby visits and in the week following, the class discusses what happened. By the end of the school year the baby is a year old, and has gone through many changes.

The children learn about the baby's neural development, about safety issues, fetal development, and learning. But most importantly, they learn to figure out why the baby acts the way it does.

Why is the baby crying, they'll be asked. Why is it laughing? What is it trying to do? Why is it trying to do that? In learning to identify the baby's feelings, they're learning to talk about and understand their own feelings, and to appreciate the feelings of others. Empathy, she says, is the gateway to collaboration.

What makes this possible, says Gordon, is that everyone relates to a baby, even the most alienated children, because babies are so vulnerable and non-threatening.

She has developed an entire teaching program around this concept, and has trained instructors who are at work throughout Canada and Australia where, she says, almost 29,000 children are benefitting. She calls the program Roots of Empathy and describes it as "a pedagogy of hope."

"There is no keener revelation of the soul of a society than the attention it pays to its vulnerable," she says — which after all, is the message we celebrate tomorrow.