

OPINION

Op-Ed: A word to the not-yet-wise: Seek out 'kindly reproofs'



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Somer Gaines listens during a Classical Mythology lecture on Monday, Aug. 24, at the Love Library in Lincoln, Neb. (Jenna Vonhofs / Associated Press)

By MARVIN KRISLOV

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“Think not those faithful who praise thy every word and deed, but those who kindly reprove thy faults.”

Socrates

Those words were inscribed on my seventh-grade yearbook by my English teacher in Lexington, Ky. And they’ve stayed in my mind to this day. It is the only yearbook inscription I remember. At the time, the quote stung. Rather than feeling inspired, I felt mystified and a bit hurt. The teacher I most admired didn’t seem to think so highly of me after all.

Over the years, however, I’ve come to understand what Socrates and my teacher meant: Everyone has faults. Flattery may feel good, but constructive criticism from family, friends, colleagues and teachers can be invaluable to one’s personal and professional growth.

Early in my previous career as a trial attorney, I conducted an extensive cross-examination of a defendant. I thought I had exposed significant inconsistencies in his story. While the court was in recess, my supervisor told me my efforts had not gone over well. He said the defendant had actually charmed the jury, and he was right. The jury acquitted the defendant in short order. My loss underscored the importance of knowing your audience, a lesson that has stuck with me.

If my supervisor had avoided negative comments by, say, only complimenting what I’d done well and ignoring what I’d done poorly, I may never have understood why I lost the case. Or at least it would have taken me much longer to figure out what I’d done wrong.

So as an educator and a father with a son about to start college, I’ve been thinking about how to convey to millennials the importance of learning not just to engage with criticism but to actively pursue it.

For a variety of reasons, many young people have limited experience with even “kind reproof.” Instead, they have become accustomed to unbridled praise. We’ve all read articles and op-eds about the “everyone gets a trophy” phenomenon. Personally, I don’t see the harm if we’re talking about youth sports. Recognizing participation serves a purpose. Still, trophies rarely lead to substantive improvement.

We educators could do more to encourage a culture of healthy criticism. Some of us eschew red ink literally and figuratively. We no longer write meaningful comments on students’ papers. In some cases, we may not set clear expectations during the semester for responding to suggestions, such as requiring students to address our criticism by revising and resubmitting papers or assignments.

But my son and all soon-to-be undergraduates also need to take responsibility for pursuing words of “kind reproof” at college. Start asking for feedback as soon as you get to campus. Many colleges and universities now have writing centers where students work with peers who have been trained to assist you with all stages of the writing process, from selecting a topic through final editing. Take advantage of student support programs. And share your drafts with peers. If someone takes the time to critique your paper, consider it a gift and thank that person. You may or may not agree with the reasoning, but try to learn from the comments.

If your teacher returns a paper or test with remarks or corrections, read them all closely. Even “A” papers often come back with suggestions for improvement. The grade is important, of course. But a teacher’s critical insights may be more helpful in the long term. One of my former colleagues chose not to look at his college grades but asked for feedback from every professor. While this method was unorthodox, I admired his resolve to dig beneath the letter or number.

Finally, as college students you can make your professors do a better job by asking questions. Socrates' method of teaching was based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and test hypotheses. Ask your professors how you can improve. And inquire about their field of expertise and their scholarly work. These discussions can form the basis of a mentoring relationship. Without dialogue there may be an implicit contract: You don't bother us and we won't bother you. This may conserve time, but it will not enrich teaching or learning.

So as the academic year begins, seek out those who will kindly reprove thy faults. Enjoy this opportunity to receive advice from people who are on your side and who want you to succeed. As Socrates — and my seventh-grade teacher — suggested, the guide posts on the route to education and personal development are sometimes printed in red.

Criticism, whether you're receiving it or offering it, doesn't have to be mean-spirited or cutting. It isn't about shouting down another person. Although the current political climate is rife with discord, it is possible to disagree without demonizing others. A praise-filled echo chamber can only encourage stasis. Constructive criticism — fact-based and motivated by a sincere desire to help someone achieve better results — helps us learn and grow.

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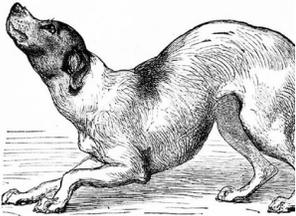
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