Lacking in Self-Esteem? Good for You!

Teachers used to laud self-worth. Turns out it can make you into a Bob Torricelli among D students, drunk drivers and former Presidents from Arkansas as it is among Nobel laureates, nuns and New York City fire fighters. In fact, according to research performed by Brad Bushman of Iowa State University and Roy Baumeister of Case Western Reserve University, people with high self-esteem can engage in far more antisocial behavior than those with low self-worth. "I think we had a great deal of optimism that high self-esteem would cause all sorts of positive consequences and that if we raised self-esteem, people would do better in life," Baumeister told the Times. "Mostly, the data have not borne that out." Racists, street thugs and school bullies all polled high on the self-esteem charts. And you can see why. If you think you're God's gift, you're particularly offended if other people don't treat you that way. So you lash out or commit crimes or cut ethical corners to reassert your preeminence. After all, who are your moral inferiors to suggest that you could be doing something, er, wrong? What do they know?

Self-esteem can also be an educational boomerang. Friends of mine who teach today's college students are constantly complaining about the high self-esteem of their students. When the kids have been told from Day One that they can do no wrong, when every grade in high school is assessed so as to make the kid feel good rather than to give an accurate measure of his work, the student can develop self-worth dangerously unrelated to the objective truth. He can then get deeply offended when he's told he is getting a C grade in college and become demoralized or extremely angry. Weak professors give in to the pressure—hence, grade inflation. Tough professors merely get exhausted trying to bring their students into vague touch with reality.

Of course, in these therapized days, reality can be a touchy subject. It's hard to accept that we may not be the best at something or that we genuinely screwed up or that low self-esteem can sometimes be fully justified. But maintaining a robust self-image while being able to absorb difficult criticism is surely worth the effort. It could lead to all sorts of strange occurrences: kids working harder, adults exercising self-control, thieves experiencing—yes—guilt, even grownup politicians taking full and painful responsibility for their actions and words. It's a pity that Torricelli still doesn't get it. But it's a deeply hopeful sign that the voters of New Jersey did.