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Dismounts and Duets: The Courage to Maintain High Standards

by Rushworth M. Kidder

Last weekend, at a final recital for a summer music program, I watched several dozen teenagers play exceptionally fine classical music on pianos, strings, and winds. Part of a local concert series -- Bay Chamber Concerts' Next Generation Program -- they took to the stage on a soggy Saturday in Rockport, Maine, with riveting concentration and an unmistakable love of music. Some were better than others, but to a person they embodied a sense of the discipline that had sustained them through years of daily practice on their way to ever-higher standards.

That's true for Olympic athletes as well. Twenty-one-year-old Paul Hamm's astounding comeback and 16-year-old Carly Patterson's lighter-than-air performance in gymnastics' all-around events last week left no one in doubt about their commitment to a relentless regimen of training. They, too, were seeking the elusive standard just barely within their reach.

What a contrast, then, to a world in which standards too often get fudged. We see it in the classroom, where grade inflation has made it practically impossible in some programs for students to expect, or receive, anything but an A.

We see it more dangerously among some school administrators who, in an effort to adapt to the requirements of the federal government's No Child Left Behind program, deliberately exclude entire categories of poor students from their assessments, so that the remaining students will have acceptably high scores.

We even see it in the movies. A report last month from the Harvard School of Public Health finds that a steady "ratings creep" in feature films has allowed increasingly violent and sexually explicit content to fly under the colors of PG-13, PG, and even G ratings.

The phenomenon is not new. A decade ago, the scholar-senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan penned a famous article for **American Scholar** titled "Defining Deviancy Down." In it he recounted the way in which well-meaning social planners, facing unmanageable levels of institutionalized mental patients, simply reset the standards, declared them healthy enough to be released, and then redefined them as "the homeless."

"There are circumstances," Moynihan wrote, "in which society will choose not to notice behavior that would be otherwise controlled, or disapproved, or even punished." He noted that "over the past generation ... the amount of deviant behavior in American society has increased" beyond the tolerance levels of the community. Accordingly, "we have been redefining deviancy so as to exempt much conduct previously stigmatized, and also quietly raising the 'normal' level in categories where behavior is now abnormal by any earlier standard."

Why do we do that? The motives, Moynihan recognized, are not bad. Much of the redefinition comes, he said, from "good people [trying] to do good." That partially explains grade inflation, where teachers fear that anything less than an A can disqualify a student from further study or jeopardize a potential job. It underlies the manipulation of data by educators desperate to prevent school shutdowns that could hurt their students. It even underlies the thinking of the Motion

Picture Association of America, which sees itself as trying to keep abreast of ever-shifting community mores.

Behind these motives, however, lies a sad misassessment of the youthful mind. In many ways, young people loathe hypocrisy more than failure. Yet the erosion of standards -- even when all it says is, We're giving you an A for doing C+ work -- sucks them inexorably into the very hypocrisy they despise. It makes them appear to be something they aren't. And they know it.

Is a relaxation of standards the kindest way to raise the next generation? Ask the young musicians and athletes. They know that discipline matters. They admire instructors and coaches who have the moral courage to speak honestly, demand responsibility, and hold to the standards even when the going gets tough. These young people want the authentic thrill of nailing the hardest dismounts and negotiating the toughest duets. They don't want somebody to simplify Bach or lighten the discus. They don't want *life* redefined into *life-lite*. Most of all, they don't want to be turned into phonies by the misplaced pity of an elder generation. Neither should we.