



In Praise of the “Personal Best”

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The Little Prince , the 1943 novella by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry , is one of the Western world’s best selling and most-read pieces of literature. It has been translated into 300 languages and turned into radio shows, stage productions, film, television and even ballet and opera. To say that The Little Prince has been influential would be an understatement, but what the novella teaches us about parenting must give us pause.

If you have not picked up the story in a while, it is the tale of a prince from outer space, where he lives on an asteroid and tends to a single rose whom he loves very much. He has spent one year away from his rose, traveling in space and on Earth. During his travels the prince has met all sorts of shallow humans for whom avarice and disengagement are the norm, and his most profound conversation is with a fox. The critical lesson that the prince takes out of his interactions is this:

“One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes... It’s the time that you spent on your rose that makes your rose so important... People have forgotten this truth,” the fox said, “But you mustn’t forget it. You become responsible for what you’ve tamed. You’re responsible for your rose. . . .”

The prince is initially disheartened when he sees a garden full of roses, as it seems to him that his rose is no longer unique. However, the fox insists that the prince’s rose is special and unique because of the love and responsibility he has for her.



Research demonstrates that children’s literature impacts the moral and social development of children. Because of its accessibility and childhood appeal, The Little Prince has influenced three generations of parents and their children. However, nearly 80 years of parents and children have boiled down the novel to the mistaken conclusion that every child is an extraordinary flower. While every child is certainly unique, this erroneous reading of the story bolsters the perception that every child is exceptional. This happens when we focus on the concept that “one sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes” but forget that the prince actually found a garden full of identical roses. Consequently,

the lesson should be that the value of a rose comes from its relationships and not from any objective comparison to other roses. The Merriam-Webster dictionary makes a clear and important distinction - exceptional means “better than average” or “superior”, while unique means “being the only one”. The prince’s rose is unique, but not exceptional.



In recent years, children's fiction has moved towards correcting the imbalanced and unhealthy self-image perpetuated by the previous generations of literature. While stories like "Harrison Bergeron" and series like Harry Potter and Percy Jackson feature key characters with amazing abilities that make them extraordinary, all of these characters' astonishing attributes are contextualized by crushingly realistic backstories. Some are orphans, some are impoverished, and others are beset by constant catastrophe, but all have their uniqueness balanced by stark realism. Perhaps this is best demonstrated in Pixar's 2004 animated film *The Incredibles*. There we see a brilliant but conflicted character

named Syndrome proclaim that "when everyone is super, no-one will be!" This idea seems to align with the century of misinterpreting *The Little Prince* until we realize that Syndrome is the villain of the movie; the antagonist is ranting to the super-powered and unique that in his ideal world everyone will be a unique rose, and the audience understands that if everyone is 'unique' then by definition nobody is. The heroes of the *The Incredibles* do have fantastic abilities, and are in some ways superior to regular mortals, but these abilities, as seen with the original children's stories, are balanced by the real challenges they are confronted with, namely family trauma and tragedy, difficulty fitting in, and unemployment.

To be clear, each of our children is unique, but most are not exceptional. As an accurate reading of *The Little Prince* demonstrates, all roses are different from one another, but frequently it is only our attachment to "our rose" that makes us feel like it is superior to the others. However, as the villainous Syndrome argues, by viewing everyone as exceptional we devalue what that truly means; something can only be above average because there are others below or at the average level. Not surprisingly, a Harvard study showed that 80% of students believe their parents value academic success and excellence over other traits. For example, Alex may be kind and empathetic but needs to work very hard at math. Lauren is a whiz at religious studies but struggles in Phys Ed. Science comes easily to Tony, but hours of extra work are needed to turn out a polished essay. It may sound harsh, but we need to stop expecting our sons and daughters to excel at everything, because that is simply unreasonable. We need to cherish our unique children for who they are and who they could be, and not raise an unreasonable bar for them to fail to reach.

Sports analogies work well in this scenario, because it often seems that sports is the only arena in which we are still willing to accept that less-than-perfect results are part of the game. I've been a Buffalo Bills fan for my entire life, and have watched them struggle through 20 years of mediocrity. Two years ago, when they finally returned to the playoffs, I got together with other Bills fans and we had a "playoff party". We all knew that the Super Bowl was out of reach, but we were extremely proud of our team for working as hard as they did to reach a new level of success. It would have been unreasonable for us to expect the Super Bowl, and it was even unreasonable for us to expect them to win that playoff game, but because we accepted that they were simply not a superior team we were able to relish their achievements without wallowing in unreasonable dreams. Another analogy: a colleague of mine was a well-respected cross country coach.

He drilled into the minds of his students that they were not competing with the other hundred runners on the course, they were competing with themselves. Their goal each time had to be a “personal best”; if they improved their performance each time, they were achieving something great. This is true of our kids as well - rather than convince them that they are all exceptional, we need to push them to do their best in all that they do regardless of how well others are doing.

In mid-November, the Or Chaim basketball team, the Knights, competed in the Israel Becker Tournament. They entered the playoff round ranked third. Even though they were tired and injured, they entered their semi-final game and played their hearts out against a team to whom they had already lost earlier in the tournament. The Knights remained evenly matched with their opponents for the entire game, and in the waning minutes pulled ahead and secured an improbable victory. Why? Because they were playing their best, regardless of the odds. In the final round, playing an undefeated team from Eilat, the Knights retained their positive attitude and played an outstanding game. Their teamwork, communication, and individual effort were all amazing, yet they lost. But that is all right, because the team from Eilat was exceptional. Following the game, I sent the team this message:

I want to let you know how immensely proud I am of you. Your heart, determination, and persistence throughout this tournament, but especially in the game against Eilat, were inspiring. Too often in the modern era people think that if you aren't the champion then you aren't anything, but you proved that fighting to your utmost, no matter the odds, is always a victory of character. You were role models to the entire school and all of the spectators.

An honest reading of *The Little Prince* tells us that ‘I am who I am and I have the need to be.’ This sentiment will teach our sons and daughters both gratitude and realism, and will go far to alleviating some of the misplaced pressure for exceptionality that has developed over the last 80 years. Let's stop forcing our kids to be people they are not, and rather inculcate in them the desire to strive for a personal best in all that they do. Marv Levy - who coached the Buffalo Bills to four consecutive Super Bowl losses - posted this snippet of Edgar A. Guest's poem on the bulletin board following the greatest comeback in NFL history:

Somebody said that it couldn't be done
But he with a chuckle replied
That “maybe it couldn't,” but he would be one
Who wouldn't say so till he tried.
So he buckled right in with the trace of a grin
Never doubting or thinking to quit it.
And he started to sing as he tackled that thing
That couldn't be done, and he did it!



¹ “Dictionary by Merriam-Webster: America’s Most-Trusted Online Dictionary.” Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, 2019, www.merriam-webster.com/.

² *Where Else Would You Rather Be?*, by Marv Levy, Sports Publishing, 2004, 375.