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Where Have All the Cowboys Gone?

Amid a moral slump, a call for some old-fashioned individualism



By HOLLY FINN

A 30-something man told me this story, adoringly. Back in elementary school, he had come home one day, fretful after a tough test. His mother, it just happened, was going to a school event soon after. So she sneaked into his classroom, found his test paper and removed it—craftily averting a bad grade. Her boy went on to the Ivy League.

I remembered that story (there's tiger mother, and then there's weasel) when I heard about the scandal at Harvard: 125 students under investigation for cheating in a class called (no lie) Introduction to Congress. Obviously, basic morals aren't taught in college, they're taught in kindergarten. And we all know the problem of cheating is not about one school. Plenty of social climbers do wrong wherever they are, from business to bike racing. Let's not even start with politicians.

Actually, let's. This Saturday marks the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation's announcement. "Lincoln," the new movie, depicts our famously decent president around that time, played by Daniel Day-Lewis, who reportedly stayed in character throughout filming. Maybe we should all do that. We could learn not just from Honest Abe but from those who shared his mid-19th-century moment: cowboys.

Just to be clear, our current moral dry spell is not American-made. Anywhere there's social mobility, there will be grasping. One 2010 study found widespread cheating on U.S.-college applications in China: 90% of recommendation letters were fake, 70%



Getty Images

A man dressed in western clothing

of essays written by someone else. In the U.K., in the past three years, more than 45,000 students at 80 institutions have been found guilty of academic misconduct.

People say they have to bend the rules just to stay in the game. But Jim Owen isn't buying it. The 71-year-old former businessman and founder of the Center for Cowboy Ethics and Leadership in Austin, Texas, is convinced that anyone can get ahead—if they've got character. Or as cowboys put it, if they've got "try." He's helped create a school curriculum to prove it.

Using 10 guiding principles dubbed the Code of the West, the program champions a bundle of behaviors to live by. This goes beyond "Never drink downstream from the herd." It includes: Make a commitment. Expect adversity. Give 110%. Kids are asked to internalize these principles, answer forbiddingly earnest questions about their place in the world (What does true success look like?) and learn as much from their peers as from their teachers. When the program was tested with at-risk students in Cherry Creek, Colo.,

78% raised their GPAs within a semester.

"We create these soft skills, we create the capacity for learning," said Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman in a speech last year about the importance of noncognitive skills such as perseverance. Paul Tough's new book, "How Children Succeed," says the same.

So far, 30 schools have gotten with this program. It has inspired similar statewide programs of the Boys & Girls Clubs, 4-H Clubs and National FFA Organization in Colorado and Wyoming. Wyoming has even adopted Mr. Owen's Code of the West as its official state code.

This is old-fashioned individualism, sure. But it's surprisingly timely. Talk to Mr. Owen for five minutes, and you wonder why we continue to covet obviously flawed name-brand institutions, from colleges to consulting firms. Are we that label-conscious? A place that once embodied honor, but is now bulking up its legal team, is suspect. It's our fault if we ignore that.

However hokey it sounds, now's the time to promote "grit, guts and heart": character as Mr. Owen describes it. Mr. Lincoln, too. Our competitive advantage was, and will be, solidity not trickiness.

The companion book to the coming film, "Lincoln: A President for the Ages," asks great historians "What would Lincoln do?" in situations from Hiroshima to "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart." I wonder what he would have done with the Ivy Leaguers under investigation or with the young man recently kicked out of an honors class at a Silicon Valley high school for cheating. His lawyer-father sued the school.

Some of the accused at Harvard have also threatened legal action if any serious punishment is imposed—they fear it will affect their future. Our fear should be that it won't.

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