

Is your self-esteem performance-based?

In the play, **DEATH OF A SALESMAN** by Arthur Miller, the chief character Willy Loman instructs his sons over their life “a well-liked man is a successful man”. Loman tells Biff to win the big game because “a thousand people will be rooting for you and loving you”.

My psychological work with men has convinced me that they are just as relationally talented and hungry for connection as women. Men have just been taught to turn their backs on many of their relational needs and instead have been stuffed with the privilege of insensitivity and a proud veneer. But there is nothing intrinsically “hardwired” about it. Research indicates that when men are placed in empathy-demanding situations, as single, custodial parents or caretakers of the ill or the elderly, they are readily capable of becoming just as nurturing and empathic as female counterparts. It isn't that men have fewer relational needs than women, but they have been conditioned to filter those needs through the screen of achievement.

But attempting to secure connection through performance is a high-risk endeavour. In the competitive marketplace a man can be digested and then thrown away. As Willy Loman learns all too painfully, in *Death of a Salesman*, even if one succeeds, there are no guarantees for the future. At Willy's funeral a friend defines him as simply “a salesman,” a man, “way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back, that's an earthquake.”

In the play's climactic scene, Willy Loman's son Biff tries desperately to resign from performance-based esteem, and make his father recognise how toxic the agenda of achieve-and-succeed has been.

BIFF: No! Nobody's hanging himself, Willy! I ran down eleven flights with a pen in my hand today. And suddenly I stopped, you hear me? And in the middle of that office building, do you hear this? I stopped in the middle of that building and I saw – the sky. I saw the things that I love in this world. The work and the food and the time to sit and smoke. And I looked at the pen and said to myself, what the hell am I grabbing this for? Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself, when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am. Why can't I say that, Willy?

Pop! I'm a dime a dozen and so are you!

I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them! I'm one dollar an hour, Willy! I tried seven states and I couldn't raise it. A buck an hour! Do you gather my meaning? I'm not bringing home prizes any more, and you're going to stop waiting for me to bring them home!

WILLY: You vengeful, spiteful mutt!

BIFF, at the peak of his fury: Pop, I'm nothing! I'm nothing, Pop. Can't you understand that, see what I am? There's no spite in it any more. I'm just what I am, that's all. *Biff's fury has spent itself and he breaks down, sobbing, holding on to Willy, who dumbly fumbles for Biff's face.*

WILLY: What're you doing? What're you doing? (To wife & mother Linda) Why is he crying?

BIFF, crying, broken: Will you let me go, for Christ's sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens? ... *and tenderly kisses his father.*

The figure of Willy Loman is an American icon of overt male depression (reminiscent of Thoreau's famous quote "most men live lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them"). His two sons, Happy and Biff, are spoon-fed a legacy of false empowerment and tacit shame that pushes both toward a more hidden yet just as damaging form of depression. At play's end, Biff steps off the track of performance esteem and grandiosity and frees himself. Whereas Biff's younger brother, Happy, has learned nothing.

"Willy Loman did not die in vain," Happy tells Biff. "He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have – to come out number one man. He fought it here and this is where I'm going to win it for him." Biff looks at his brother with pity and leads their stricken mother away.

The Loman family was caught in a lethal encounter with the masculine dream. Willy gives up his very life to land insurance money in his son's pocket, saying, "That boy will be magnificent!" He never once understands that his son, like all children, has been magnificent all along. Performance-based esteem claims the life of one family member and severely damages the others.

[I recommend viewing on YouTube the 4:53 clip of the prior scripted scene, titled "Death of a Salesman Biff Confronts Willy" starring Warren Mitchell & Iain Glen. A powerful drama]

On a brighter note, in the film *Searching for Bobby Fischer* (1993), based on the true story of Josh Waitzkin, the highest-ranking U.S. chess player under eighteen, a father wrestles with many of the same issues that defeated Willy Loman. This father, however, awakens from the dream.

Conclusion:

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with vigorous competition; there is nothing wrong with working hard and playing hard. Indeed, there is something wonderful in the feeling that comes from working up a sweat and going all out to defeat one's opponent on the tennis court or footy field or corporate meeting – so long as the passion falls short of placing the boy, man's or his opponent's self-worth on the line. The difference between healthy enjoyment of achievement and competition and its unhealthy expression is analogous to the distinction between the recreational and the abusive use of alcohol or addictive substances. A recreational drinker begins with a baseline feeling of relative contentment and the drug is used as an enhancement. The state he returns to after the drug has worn off is the satisfactory state he began with. The abusive drinker medicates a baseline experience that is painful or empty, and when the drug wears off, the underlying ill ease returns or worsens.

Similarly, healthy joy in competition and achievement enhances an already invigorated boy. He does not rely on it to feel worthy, and he is not devastated on occasions of failure. In the same way that performance is not the boy's ticket to a sense of self-worth, it is also not a ticket to relational connection. Contrary to conventional ideas that link self-worth and self-reliance, in fact it is more accurate to link self-worth and relational connection. Unlike traditional mythic images of the lone, utterly self-sufficient hero, real boys and men need social connection just as much as do girls and women. A sense of self-worth always implies a secure sense of membership – a sense of mattering to someone, of being worthy of intimacy. *In a healthy relationship to performance, achievement is a labour of love that exists within the context of secure connection, not an act of grandiosity that takes the place of connection. Grandiose and/or performance-based-esteem type men risk further alienation if they succeed and the threat of psychological breakdown if they fail.*

Primary source: "I don't want to talk about it" book by Terry Real (1997)