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The Ivy League, Mental Illness, and the Meaning of Life

William Deresiewicz explains how an elite education can lead to a cycle of grandiosity and depression.



William Deresiewicz

LAUREN CASSANI DAVIS | AUG 19, 2014 |

TEXT SIZE



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The former Yale English professor William Deresiewicz stirred up quite a

storm earlier this month with his *New Republic* essay “[Don’t Send Your Kid to the Ivy League](#)”—a damning critique of the nation’s most revered and wealthy educational institutions, and the flawed meritocracy they represent. He takes these arguments even further in his upcoming book, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*. Part cultural commentary, part philosophical treatise on the meaning of education itself, the book reads like a self-help manual for ambitious yet internally adrift adolescents struggling to figure out how to navigate the college system, and ultimately their own lives. Deresiewicz, who is also the author of *A Jane Austen Education: How Six Novels Taught Me About Love, Friendship and the Things That Really Matter*, spoke to me on the phone from his home in Portland, Oregon.

Lauren Cassani Davis: How does the phrase “excellent sheep” describe the typical student at an elite college today?

William Deresiewicz: The most interesting thing about that phrase is that I didn’t write it myself. It came out of the mouth of a student of mine, and just seemed perfect. They’re “excellent” because they have fulfilled all the requirements for getting into an elite college, but it’s very narrow excellence. These are kids who will perform to the specifications you define, and they will do that without particularly thinking about why they’re doing it. They just know that they will jump the next hoop.

Davis: Do you see a connection between this “hoop-jumping” mindset and other trends, like mental-health issues, on college campuses?

Deresiewicz: The mental-health issues, absolutely. People have written books about this—adolescent therapists like Madeline Levine, who wrote *The Price of Privilege*. These students are made to understand that they have to be perfect, that they have to do everything perfectly, but they haven’t

turned to themselves to ask why they're doing it. It's almost like a cruel experiment with animals that we're performing—every time the red light goes on, you have to push the bar. Of course they're stressed.

This is also why they're sheep, because they have never been given an opportunity to develop their ability to find their own direction. They're always doing the next thing they're being told to do. The trouble is that at a certain point, the directives stop. Though maybe not, because even when it comes to choosing a career, there are certain chutes that kids, especially at elite colleges, tend to get funneled towards. And if you've always been told what you're going to do, these options are the easiest in terms of making decisions, though not necessarily easiest in terms of the work involved.

Davis: You've observed that Ivy League students have an internal struggle with both "grandiosity and depression." Can you explain this further?

Deresiewicz: Alice Miller wrote about this 30-plus years ago in the classic *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, but I had to experience it to see it for myself. The grandiosity is that sense of "you're the greatest, you're the best, you're the brightest." This kind of praise and reinforcement all the time makes students feel they're the greatest kid in the world. And I would say that this is even worse than when I was a kid. Now there's a whole culture of parenting around this positive reinforcement.

These kids were always the best of their class, and their teachers were always praising them, inflating their ego. But it's a false self-esteem. It's not real self-possession, where you are measuring yourself against your own internal standards and having a sense that you're working towards something. It's totally conditional, and constantly has to be pumped up by the next grade, the next A, or gold star. As Miller says, what you're really learning is that your parents' love is conditional on this achievement. So when you fail, even a little bit, even if you just get a B on a test, or an A- on a test, the whole thing

collapses. It may only collapse temporarily, but it's a profound collapse—you feel literally worthless.

These are kids who have no ability to measure their own worth in any realistic way—either you are on top of the world, or you are worthless. And that kind of all-or-nothing mentality really pervades the whole system. It's also why it's Harvard or the gutter: If you don't get into Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, it's a disgrace. If you go to Wesleyan, you can never show your face in public again.

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This is not really the only way to succeed, but this crazy definition not only of success, but of how you achieve success, doesn't even really reflect how actually successful people achieve success. Steve Jobs is an obvious example, because he was obviously very gifted and ambitious but he took a circuitous path, and people who are very successful doing interesting things also often take circuitous paths.

This notion that you've got to do X, Y, and Z or else your life is over makes you end up as a high-functioning sheep. You end up being the kind of leader that I talk about in the last section of the book. You get to the top, or you get near the top, but you don't actually do anything interesting there—you just sort of fulfill your function in the organization. You don't initiate or create.

Davis: That ties in with your argument that words like “leadership” and “service” have become hollow in the whole college process.

Deresiewicz: There’s a list of things that everyone knows you’re supposed to do to get into college: scores, extracurriculars, and then these two other things, “leadership” and “service.” They’ve been completely ritualized, and kids have become cynical about them because they know they just need to demonstrate them. In the case of leadership, which is supposed to be about qualities of character, self-sacrifice, initiative, and vision, it just means getting to the top, and that’s all. If you get a position with some authority you are, by definition, a leader. And service, if anything, is even worse. Service is supposed to be about making the world a better place or helping people who are less fortunate, but because it’s done for the resume, it really just becomes about yourself.

Davis: You argue that society transmits its values through education. How would you summarize the values transmitted through the elite-education system?

Deresiewicz: I would summarize the values by quoting Tony Hayward, the famous CEO of BP. In the middle of this giant environmental disaster he said, “I want to get my life back.” He had been promised certain rewards and now had this horrible experience of actually having to take responsibility for something, and feel bad. So those are the values that the system is transmitting: self-aggrandizement, being in service to yourself, a good life defined exclusively in terms of conventional markers of success (wealth and status), no real commitment to education or learning, to thinking, and no real commitment to making the world a better place. And I think we see that in the last 50 years, the meritocracy has created a world that’s getting better and better for the meritocracy and worse and worse for everyone else.

Davis: What kinds of values do you think education should be passing on?

Deresiewicz: Ultimately, colleges have inherited the spiritual mission of churches. As religious beliefs have declined with the rise of science, especially among educated people, people started to turn elsewhere to ask the big questions: What does life mean? What is the world about? People turned to works of art, to literature, music, theater, philosophy, which were in turn brought into college curricula.

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That’s what the idea of a humanities education in college is and should be about, but part of that idea has very much declined. It’s not about learning a specific body of information or skills the way other parts of a college education quite properly should be. Studying the humanities is about giving yourself the opportunity to engage in acts of self reflection, seeking answers to the kinds of questions you ask yourself not in a specialized capacity—but in the general capacity of being a human being, as a citizen.

Davis: Some criticize this kind of self-reflection as narcissistic, but you argue that it’s actually “the most practical thing in the world.”

Deresiewicz: I just hate it when people talk about how self reflection is somehow self indulgent—as if the things that students were being invited to do were *not*, like making themselves rich and powerful. How is that not

self-indulgent? But I would say, aside from all the personal, intellectual, spiritual benefits of self-awareness—I can't believe we even have to argue this—the main point is to know yourself so you know what you want in the world. You can decide, what is the best work for me, what is the best career for me, what are the rewards that I really want. And maybe you'll end up saying that I do need a certain level of wealth, but you will know it because you will have come to know yourself. And you will be acting on your own initiative instead of having absorbed the messages that have been instilled in you unconsciously.

Davis: Gaining self-knowledge isn't a simple or predictable process. Are there certain things that can only be learned outside the classroom?

Deresiewicz: There are certainly limits to formal institutional education. As you say, gaining self-knowledge is going to happen when it's going to happen. But it's certainly not going to happen if kids don't have the tools to do it. So that's the first thing that an education can do—help kids develop the means of reflection, and then, maybe it'll happen the next year, or the next summer. A book you read in 12th grade or as a sophomore in college might suddenly click five years later. So yes, it happens throughout your life. But you've got to start, and I think you've got to start when you're young. Developmentally, adolescence and the early 20s are precisely the time to ask these questions because you are engaged in making the transition from childhood certainty to adult conviction.

Aside from the classes themselves, the fact that we've created a system where kids are constantly busy, and have no time for solitude or reflection, is going to take its toll. We need to create a situation where kids feel like they don't have to be "on" all the time. Given the chance, adolescents tend to engage in very intense conversation, and a lot of life learning happens laterally, happens peer to peer. But if they're constantly busy, there's literally no time. It's crazy. We've taken adolescence away from adolescents. School

must not take away your opportunities to self-reflect on your own.

When I taught humanities classes, I never talked about self-reflection, and I never invited students to talk about their feelings or their backgrounds or their experiences. I would sometimes do it with students one on one, if they wanted to, but it's an indirect process. The books are designed to make you think about your life. You can just talk about Achilles, or Elizabeth Bennett, it doesn't matter if you leave the personal stuff out of the conversation. The books do the work of getting the soul in motion.

One good thing that they do at Lawrence University is have a course where freshmen can read great books and at the same time think about what an education is for. You don't have to talk too personally there, but at least you're still preparing yourself to understand your college education in an appropriate way.

Davis: What was your own college experience like?

Deresiewicz: I got to college in '81, so the system was nowhere near as hysterical as it is now. But it was still basically the same system. My dad was an immigrant, a college professor, a scientist, and he had very specific expectations. I decided on my major—science—literally before classes even started, and it wasn't a good decision. I love science but I never gave myself a chance to discover other things, and by the middle of college I realized that I should have been an English major because that's what I really loved. I drifted for two or three years after college until I reached a cinematic moment in my life when I realized I needed to go and study English, whatever it takes, because I wouldn't be happy until I did. So finally, four years after college, I went back and started a Ph.D. program.

I've continued to struggle with the psychological stuff—the cycle of grandiosity and depression, the constant comparisons. Once it gets

implanted, you will always struggle with it, and you just get better, hopefully, at dealing with it. But the take home message is that everyone has to liberate themselves from this system. Education should be an act of liberation. We need to make a better system but ultimately everybody has to claim their freedom for themselves.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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