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## The Cynic

When did we decide that it's easier to be the cynic than to look at the world in a deeper way? How is it that we accept false truths instead of holding out for real understanding? I just read an email where the sender proclaims,

*"...No one today has the pride or work ethic that made this country great. Everything is "JUST ENOUGH TO GET BY, AND THE HELL WITH EVERYONE ELSE."*

I find this extremely offensive and sad. Offensive that such a sweeping generalization could be made of the human species, and sad that someone actually believes it.

It's easy to be the cynic and blame results on poor attitude, lack of pride and work ethic. It's much harder to see the talents that each one of us possesses and how you might be a part of encouraging and bringing those talents into the world, for the benefit of that person and others.

In my work as a personal coach and organization development consultant, I see how desperately people want to contribute and give what they have to others. The "shell" of people we see everyday may bear some resemblance to the cynic's words. But underneath that veneer, there's a person wanting more meaning in their life, more purpose, and more pride in who they are and what they can give to the world. This is part of the human condition that doesn't change with your station in life.

In an earlier career as an engineer, I had the good fortune of leading project teams and supervising technicians. I say good fortune because, while these experiences weren't always pleasant, they taught me a lot about the working with others. In my first job out of college, I was responsible for monitoring water-filled systems in a nuclear power plant, not only for normal stuff like pH but also for the really good stuff, like radioactivity. I relied on unionized technicians to draw water samples and to run the various analytical tests on the samples. This, they faithfully did, with every request I made. One day, I was remiss in looking at the test results until days later. What a mistake. I was sending a clear signal to the technician that his work didn't matter if I couldn't even take the time to look at the results. I got an earful from the old-timer in the group, a crusty chemist who was a master at handling human affairs, even if he never let on. I've never forgotten that experience, as it taught me that making the work matter, well, matters.

Many years later, after leaving the world of Homer Simpson, I worked in Bell Labs as a software engineer. I led a team of technical professionals to develop a new feature for a telephone switch. Each person had their area of expertise to contribute to the overall project—human factors, customer liaison, software development, software testing. I introduced into our weekly meetings a segment called "Take a Bow", right before the section on critical issues. This was a place to recognize a peer for something they had done right, a deed that someone noticed and appreciated. Initially, this group of engineers found it difficult to express their appreciation to a peer. But over time, the words spilled out easily and genuinely. Those few minutes during the meeting served to fuel the rest of the two-hour meeting with enthusiasm, energy, trust, and good will. I never had to worry about coercing a team member to step up to the plate when something on the project needed to be done. The lesson was clear: *Recognizing good work not only impacts the "giver" and "receiver", but others around them.* The benefit to the project was huge as the team delivered on-time and with high quality, ultimately resulting in satisfied customers.

Does this country suffer from a lack of pride and work ethic? Are there too many slackers looking out for just themselves? Hardly. What's lacking is our own appreciation for the talent and goodness in others, in catching them doing something right. We have been done in by our own ignorance on making the work matter. Go ahead. Break the cynic's heart and open your own heart. Could it be any simpler?

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