

Safety Dance

by

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Today's politically correct vogue is to wring one's hands and fulminate about how dangerous the world is and how dire the need to protect one and all from its perils. Mental health disabilities and concussions are, among other human traumas, serious stuff. But it all seems a little overdone.

While the incidents of mental health claims and sport-related serious injuries are as high as ever in raw volume, a doubter might question its significance. Is there really more? Or are we just searching for, noting, and recording it now? This challenges the premise of greater danger, and the argument applies as readily to mental health injury as to cancer and allergy epidemics. It's harder, I think, to argue that concussions went unrecognized and so could have been under-reported 30-years ago. That suggests greater danger. It does not mean it's not ridiculous. Not the injuries; the circus of problem-solving.

The same day newspapers carried the story about Minister Clement's pronouncement on mental health action, I saw a fellow on a bike wearing what looked like a 40-year old Cooper™ hockey helmet. It wasn't a zippy cycling helmet, so it caught my attention and took my thoughts to the ongoing, very public finger wagging about concussions in hockey. I recalled that there was a time when that flimsy piece of plastic with an eighth inch of Styrofoam was the only wrapping on kids' heads. Yet, so many of us live to reminisce about it.

What bothers me most about the well-meaning debates and pronouncements, be it about depression furloughs or kids' cranial collisions, is that they are just so typically focused wrong. It is, of course, easier and more socially acceptable, never mind profitable, to push protection and palliatives than it is to deal with real problems. We leave uncomfortable stuff alone.

Regarding employee mental health issues untenably impacting labour costs, what we *really* don't want to talk about is that we've done and keep doing it to ourselves. We avoid how mobile devices and PCs before them inconveniently changed what it means to be working. Not only are we all expected to be available within the hour if not actually responding in the moment, it doesn't end at 5:00PM or Friday at the pub. That is fact.

Instead of acknowledging and debating the incompatibility of commercial efficiency and human frailty, we are treated to paeans to the "new reality" or some derivative. It's liberating, they say. Not so much unless fetters factor into your definition of free. But it is an efficiency gainer, so it's not going anywhere. That leaves the chattering classes to accept the root issue wholesale and babble on about the deleterious effects.

What about the hollowing out of the organization? It's good for organizations because short-term productivity is high. It's not good for people, because no machine runs at the yellow line for years on end without burning out. People in "management" are being overworked, the demands on their time extend well beyond what was traditionally work time, and they know that they are always one false move from not having to worry about it at all. Why would anyone be stressed or depressed?

Then there's this business of sports injuries, with concussion trending right now. Of course being concussed is bad, especially for a brain still being formed. Then again, so is pushing a teenage body to meet the demands of an adult body. Speaking only of hockey, what we don't want to talk about is that WE are the cause of the problem, one that we're not eager to cure.

Back to the Cooper™ helmet. Hockey is a pretty rough sport. It was when I played as a kid. But it was rough within limits. Bad helmets and other variants of plastic, felt, and sponge left a lot of opportunity to feel pain, which took some spirit out of the boys. You didn't try doing too much harm to others because, among other things, it was probably going to hurt you too.

Over the past forty years, we've outfitted our little gladiators with Kevlar and ballistic protection that makes them (feel) practically invincible. When over-protected, the most important organ in the body doesn't work effectively. Because there is no pain escalation to indicate it's time to back off, one can forget that one is, in fact, going to get hurt. And when it inevitably does happen, it won't be just a little owey either! Add a persistent hockey season. Unlike the few boys that went to one-week, summer hockey camp in the 1970s, now every child has pre-season training and development prior to the try-outs that precede the season, which gets followed by a post-season work-down, etc... In other words, kids have the protection needed to detach them from the reality of being hurt, plus we train them to be stronger and more aggressive earlier. Never mind the parents who demand that little Mikey behaves like the NHL star that dad wishes he'd been, and then encourage aggression by behaving like lunatics in the stands.

Hockey today isn't more dangerous, nor is cycling or skiing or any other sport. Work and life is not harder than a century ago. What we've done to ourselves in the name of progress, though, is create everything we need to push ourselves and our children up to and past the breaking point physically and mentally. Contrary to my first employer's view, people are really not machines. You can't merely grease them and replace worn parts. They can't work at their limit all the time. They can't be expected to always self-heal from the inevitable injuries. But every employer knows that there is plenty of supply. So, ultimately, they *can* be replaced when worn out. It's just costly; and not very pleasant salon conversation.

Meantime, we can all talk about how children are being physically injured and adults are being mentally tormented, and about what paternalistic safety equipment and palliative programs we can enforce. It makes us feel like we're doing something valuable. And that's good for *our* mental well-being.

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