

Coping and hoping

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By JERRY CAMMARATA

Lawrence Taylor, the famed "LT" of the New York Giants football team, has proven that his ability to accomplish Herculean tasks on the gridiron is no guarantee that he can easily transcend other physical limitations. His recent trouble with the law over an alleged drug purchase put his name back in the headlines, where the names of many other Olympians of athletics and the arts have been for the same reason.

Taylor reportedly told members of the press that he was under a great deal of pressure and was passing through stormy seas in his personal life. Perhaps he was looking for a way to cope with his problems.

We try to prevent our young people from even getting started in drugs by telling them to "just say no," but we give them so little to which to say "yes." We want them to "increase the peace," and otherwise avoid the ills of addiction, recreational sex, violence, but we give them almost nothing in the way of replacements for these.

Oh, we offer them employment at what are largely make-work jobs for a few weeks in summer, or the chance to play basketball in a well-lit and secure environment instead of on the streets, but we do not point the way to a new way of life. When the summer ends, or high school is finished, or the doors shut even in the early morning after a midnight basketball game, they stand as bereft of answers as they ever were.

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The future, if there is to be one, lies in education, real education, rich education.

After all, why do we teach our young people to read? Is it not so that they can enjoy the music of our language's poetry, be enlightened by the insight of our culture's drama, and ponder the questions posed by philosophers through the centuries?

Young people turn to the thrill of drugs, to the sleep of narcotics, to the escape of alcohol to anesthetize themselves against the pain of their lives: In some cases it is the acute pain of difficult home situations or deteriorating neighborhoods; in many cases it is simply the loneliness and angst of adolescence; and for more than a few it is the quiet agony of boredom that comes to minds unchallenged whose vistas are blocked by fogged and starved imaginations.

Young people turn to sex to fill the emptiness of isolation, the emotional vacuums of modern life. The turn to violence because, in their frustration, their overwhelming energy (the gift and curse of youth) can find no other outlet, and they conceive of no other way to settle their disputes.

"Civilization" is literally the practice of dwelling in cities, and an "idiot" to the ancient Greeks was one who did not participate in the community. If we expect our children to avoid the pitfalls that even the ancients knew (remember how Odysseus' crew was enchained by the soporific enjoyed by the Lotus-eaters), and if we expect our youngsters to grow up peaceful and civilized, instead of murdering when they are "dis-ed," and idiotically demanding their "propers" (to use the argot of the streets), we must provide them with an education that will not simply press politically correct slogans to their brows, but will open to them the centuries of thought and art that represent the best mankind has to offer.

Education, then, is the true answer to our national plagues of addiction and violence,

not because these horrors will disappear when we tell young people that they are wrong, but because true education will open their minds to beauty, to contemplation, and then to new ways of thinking about themselves and their place in this society.

A child who feels trapped by his or her poverty, or domestic situation, or even by the age-old problems of growing up (and who of us has not, at one time or another, felt this way) will have no reason to seek the dulling comfort of a marijuana-induced stupor if given a glance at hope and food for

dreams that can be found in heroic biographies and classic novels. A youth who knows only the victory of blood may choose another path if given the chance to consider the moral victory of others, or to ponder the principles he will choose to guide his life that may be found in the works of great authors.

In short, education is the only way to show the next generation another way, a new set of choices beyond the mere satisfaction of animal instincts. Education about drugs or about violence is fine, but it remains empty unless we give

young people a way to find a reason why a life without these things is important. In a sense, a rich education gives the greatest coping skills of all because it helps us to cope with ultimate questions that are the real riddles that we avoid by concentrating on short-term problems and temporary solutions.

Is it really as simple as that? Read a book, and your problems go away?

Of course not. But a book will challenge the mind, where a drug will not. A book may trigger an insight or an

inquiry, but a fist will not. And all the "just saying no" in the world will never evoke the questions that require a yes answer.

Lawrence Taylor is alleged to have looked for an answer to his problems by searching for a chemical that would make them disappear. Problems only disappear when confronted, and a solid education will give our youngsters the tools and the inspiration they need to do just that.

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