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Victorian values for the 21st century
By Margaret Wente

The new economy will be won by those who can exercise discipline, conscientiousness and diligence

My dental hygienist is one of the most important people in my life. She keeps my teeth from falling out. She’s highly skilled, diligent and conscientious, and when she tells me I need to floss more, she does it in the nicest way. Like the vast majority of dental hygienists, she’s a woman.

"Are there any men who do this?" I asked. She laughed. She said she’d never met one.

Being a dental hygienist is a pretty good career, especially as boomers enter their peri-ontal years. But the aptitudes you need to do the work are far more common among women than men: attention to detail, good people skills, super-cleanliness, ability to work in teams, calm and steady temperament. Men who go into the field are often the only males in their classes.

The 21st century will have a lot more work like dental hygiene, and a lot less work where it’s okay to skip the morning shower, have a few beers at lunch and screw off in the fall to go duck hunting. That’s an important reason why female employment has been on the rise and men’s participation in the work force has plunged to record lows.

We hear a lot of noise about creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship. These are supposedly the defining traits that will separate the winners from the losers in the new hyper-competitive meritocracy. But for most of us, the real keys to success are far more old-fashioned – Victorian, even. They are self-regulation, conscientiousness and diligence. More than ever, perhaps, 21st-century success will require 19th-century values.

As for education, it won’t do much good for people who aren’t motivated or disciplined enough to acquire it. These people are mainly men. We all know that low-skilled men will be our world’s biggest losers, but it’s often not lack of skills that holds them back. It’s lack of the aptitudes and attitudes needed for success. These are the men who can’t stay in school, can’t apply themselves, can’t take direction or defer rewards, can’t be reliable and can’t function well in teams. "Young male hotheads who just can’t follow orders are pretty well doomed," economist Tyler Cowen says in Average is Over, a sharp and sobering book on who will get ahead, and why.

Self-regulation matters more today in every field – even journalism. In the distant mists of time, when newspapers were still set in hot type and women were relegated to the women’s sect on, newsmen smoked like chimneys, cursed like sailors and got hammered at the Press Club every night. Their social skills would never make the cut today. In modern newsrooms, no one ever drinks or smokes or yells. Young reporters are required to have advanced degrees, take direction well and work in teams. Their idea of substance abuse is eating doughnuts in the office.

Today, it’s work habits – not credentials or connections – that separate one liberal-arts BA from another. The one who works her butt off and saves her money still destined for the upper middle-class. The Grand Theft Auto addict is destined for his parents’ basement.

The trouble is that cultivating 19th-century habits in the 21st century isn’t easy. In Victorian times, self-regulation was reinforced by many kinds of external pressure, including social norms, religion, family and Queen. The consequences of lapsing from the straight and narrow – social disgrace, even ruin – could be severe. Today, you’re
far more relevant on yourself to stay the course, and nobody else much cares if you don’t.

On top of that, we face temptations our ancestors could never have imagined — many of them engineered to zero in on our pleasure centres with scientific precision. As Daniel Akst argues in his highly readable book, *Temptation: Finding Self-Control in an Age of Excess*, modern life requires an unnatural degree of self-control. Our ancestors were too busy just surviving to succumb to bad habits. But in an age of super-abundance, it’s a constant struggle to keep our appetites in check. “It’s not that we have less willpower than we used to,” he writes, “but rather that modern life immerses us daily in a set of temptations far more evolved than we are.”

Self-discipline and high IQ often go together. But they are not the same. As Mr. Akst reports, self-discipline is a far better predictor of university grades than either IQ or SAT scores. Two University of Pennsylvania research psychologists, Martin Seligman and Angela Duckworth, have argued that a major reason for student underachievement is not inadequate schools or boring textbooks, but “failure to exercise self-discipline ... we believe that many of America’s children have trouble making choices that require them to sacrifice short-term pleasure for long-term gain.”

The million-dollar question is to what extent these qualities can be instilled in kids — especially poor ones, who lack the family support and other advantages available to children from better-off families. That’s the new holy grail in education. It’s also the founder of the KIPP Trust charter school movement, which emphasizes character, high expectations and discipline. And it’s the reason that Ms. Duckworth won a MacArthur “Genius” award. The money will be used to fund her research into practical ways of strengthening self-regulation among children.

"The more a society progresses, the bigger a problem self-control turns out to be," Mr. Cowen says. In the new hyper-meritocracy, people with temperate habits and Victorian values will do better than ever — and people who can’t resist temptation will do even worse.

Which reminds me: I’ve got to go home and floss my teeth.

References

2. www.kipp.org
3. www.macfound.org/fellows/class/2013