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A SURE WAY TO LET THE KIDS DOWN

By Steve Bakke  October 8, 2019



I've been struggling with how to react to the 16-year-old Swedish “climate crisis messenger,” Greta Thunberg. What should I think about what she’s doing and how adults are reacting?

Thunberg’s demeanor is a combination of terror and panic. How should we interpret that? It’s difficult to separate her emotion from any wisdom she’s trying to impart. I recall also having concerns when the ominously named youth movement “March for Our Lives” was organized early in 2018.

If kids getting involved can be a catalyst for making meaningful improvements, their sincere efforts should be acknowledged. But, in a very important way, we must be careful not to let the kids down. How could that happen? That’s the question I’m trying to answer in this brief commentary. My answer may not be one you’re expecting.

The well-intended “March” movement was a reaction to mass gun violence, particularly in schools. It grew out of a perceived lack of progress in reducing mass killings – school shootings in particular. Eventually, some students became bullies – almost demagogues. Ultimately, the movement deteriorated, perhaps because of misguided adult leadership.

Reacting to Greta’s visit to the United States and the United Nations, presidential candidate Bernie Sanders expressed agreement with other prominent politicians by stating: “What a disgrace that it takes a 16-year-old to tell world leaders what they won’t acknowledge. We cannot continue with this type of ruthless capitalism that is destroying our planet. This is why we need young people leading our climate justice movement.” Bernie, are you sure you want teenagers leading the movement?

Greta’s message is that capitalistic selfishness led to a climate crisis which set in motion imminent human mass extinction. She confidently states: “We will be the last generation to survive.” The imminent extinction assertion isn’t credible, and she’s making it without adequate information. Sadly, her adult “handlers” are encouraging this message because it advances their narrative cause without having to make outrageous claims themselves.

These young activists are emboldened by the reaction they generate which feeds their own emotions. This can lead to bullying tendencies as we experienced with the “March”

movement. For example, Greta admonishes her audience with the warning: “My message is we’ll be watching you.”

We can admire these kids, but is it wise to put them on a pedestal? I’m concerned that, facing this intimidating youthful outrage, the “adult response” will be to conclude these activists possess wise, urgent and conclusive insights. I’m fearful this will lead to impetuous emotional reactions, heavy on repeating old mistakes. We’ll end up with more ill-advised, and inadequately researched solutions.

Is Greta following an assigned script by assuming a role of unassailable moral authority? If adult activists convince kids to promote false or exaggerated information, they’re really just hiding behind the kids’ energy and emotion. That’s manipulation and exploitation.

There have been family disclosures about Greta’s emotional and medical history – obsessions, anxiety, and a type of autism. These may or may not be relevant to this situation, but if using this teenager as a standard-bearer involves any manipulation, given her history, it’s fair to question whether any exploitation could border on abuse.

Bottom line, we shouldn’t be telling young people, “be afraid, be very afraid.” We should be inspired by them, we should listen to them and borrow their energy. At the same time, we should help them realize they are fortunate to be living during a historically unique time. It’s unique in terms of health, longevity, technology, prosperity, problem solving tools, resources, and so much more.

We need to be concerned with our planet’s problems, but we must be sure young people can also see a happy place on their horizon. Economist Stephen Moore stated it well: “Our responsibility as parents, teachers, clergy and lawmakers is to teach the children how to solve problems effectively, not to preach the end of the world.”

These kids’ well-intentioned outrage and demonstrations garner lots of attention, but we must be careful how we react to this pressure. They’re imploring us to do the right thing by solving the world’s problems. A sure way to let these kids down would be to let them “call the shots” by looking to them for the solutions.