

## Grading scales curb learning

The scenario goes something like this:

You have spent endless hours studying for an upcoming exam. Long nights in the library, study groups and tutors and whatever else you can fit in before the exam. The night before the exam arrives, and you finish up some last-minute cramming and then hit the sack, hoping that everything you've studied and read doesn't seep out your ear while you are sleeping.

The next morning you wake up bright and early and do a quick read-over of your notes before heading to class. Finally, the test is placed in front of you, and it takes all of five seconds for you to realize that you would have been better off sleeping through the exam.

Your palms start to sweat and your heart starts to pound. You write down the first things that pop into your head, hoping for partial credit. You turn in your exam with a wrenching feeling in your gut. With the exam done and over with, all there is to do is to hope that everyone else had the same gut-wrenching feeling and pray for a 50-point scale.

Does this scenario sound familiar? If you have ever been a student, I'm sure it does. Yes, ladies and gentleman, it's the great American grading system. Fail every exam, learn nothing and still come out with a passing grade. Who could beat that deal?

If it weren't for a few 50-point scales, I probably would not be



**Beth Finsten**

where I am today. I definitely would have failed a few classes instead of getting C's, if it weren't for grading scales.

It is almost like I am the only one who knows that I have passed classes with grades that I have never earned. Wouldn't it make more sense if, instead of professors trying to cram six to eight chapters down your throat in two weeks time, they took those two weeks to thoroughly go through two to three chapters so the students weren't overwhelmed and actually were able to learn something?

A novel concept, I know. I can't even remember the last time I actually mastered a subject. I, like most students, have always depended on the curve to make up for a lack of knowledge.

With each new semester, I get more anxious about the ones that lay ahead. I wonder if I have the knowledge and ability to continue my studies, when I have just been passing by the skin of my teeth with a little help from ye olde grading scale.

It makes me wonder what I have

actually learned in all my years of education. It seems the longer I spend in school, the less I seem to learn. It completely blows my mind that I can spend a whole semester in a class, learn only 10 percent of what was taught and still end up passing in the end.

I can only assume that curves were created to compensate for and help along those blessed with an average brain. My problem, despite my average brain, is that I don't learn or pick up on things quite as fast as some students. Give me an exam over two or three chapters that were covered thoroughly, and I'm almost positive that I wouldn't need a curve to pass the exam. Throw six or seven chapters my way all at once, expect me to know everything and it will take a lot more than a 50-point scale to get me through.

What our great educational system has yet to understand and deal with is that every student learns at a different pace and in different ways. Until we can find a way to deal with the problem, curves and grading scales will continue to be part of the American educational system.

I'll be waiting for the day when what I have been taught and what I have learned are one and the same.

It would be nice to be able to walk into a class and by the end feel that I never needed to rely on the grading scale to get me through.

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## Family and freedom compete in divorce

Have you heard the one about the 95-year-old couple who went to divorce court after 70 unhappy years of marriage? The judge asked them why they hadn't split long ago? The couple said, "We were waiting for the children to die."

It's a joke that made the rounds back in the 1970s, when cultural barbs were pointed at people who stayed together "for the sake of the children." But when I recycled this oldie to lunchmates at a recent conference on marriage held by the Council on Families in America, they'd never heard it.

What does it mean when an old joke gets new laughs? That we've probably passed through an entire generation of humor, a full cycle of attitudes, a whole swing of the pendulum.

It turns out that "staying together for the sake of the children" is very much on the minds of council members — an impressive collection of scholars, think tankers and culture-watchers who range politically from mid-left to mid-right. Together, they have cobbled together a report on "Marriage in America," which is also a report on unmarried in America.

Their central point is that "the divorce revolution — the steady displacement of a marriage culture by a culture of divorce and unwed parenthood — has failed." It's failed children. And it's time to turn our attention back to strengthening marriage.

In many ways this report constitutes a brave leap into the mainstream, middle-class, heart-of-the-family matter. In the ongoing family values debate, Americans have so far pointed their collective finger at relatively easy targets like unwed mothers and disappearing dads.

But in sheer numbers, divorce is the chief culprit in the breakup of the family and the deteriorating well-being of children. And we have indeed been, as the report says, "curiously silent on the subject of marriage."

In an era when every other marriage ends, the extent of divorce has served to stifle us. Even Dan Quayle, in a second "Murphy Brown" speech last fall, insisted "I'm not talking about a situation where there is a divorce. ..." His own grandmother was divorced, he murmured, as were half of his cousins. Not to mention an entire roster of "pro-family" Republican leaders from Gramm to Dole to Gingrich.

We're also silent because divorce strikes at a central



**Ellen Goodman**

conflict between two sets of American values. One is the value we place on individual freedom, on striking out and starting over, on the pursuit of happiness. The other is the value we place on commitment, building communities and stable families.

The report on marriage is unequivocally and unapologetically written from the perspective of children. The stated goal is to increase the number of children growing up with both parents.

William Galston, an outgoing member of the White House Domestic Policy Council, praised the authors of the report for having "the courage to say that middle-class parents who blithely divorce" are every bit as

damaging to their children as unwed 17-year-olds. But in my experience, "blithely" is a word that people often attach to other people's divorces.

At the height of the "divorce revolution" Americans may have falsely comforted themselves with the idea that children were better off in broken than warring homes. In the counterrevolution, we can't wish away marital problems as trivial.

There is more than enough intellectual firepower among the council members to jump-start an important national conversation about marriage and how society can support it. Their laundry list of recommendations ranges from the worthy to the wishful, from a simple plea that the entertainment industry stop glamorizing infidelity to a controversial suggestion that legislators reconsider no-fault divorce laws.

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But if we're to rebuild a culture of marriage that works for adults AND children, we have to be as concerned with the quality as with the longevity of marriage. One of the scholars here said, "We decided to put relationships between men and women off to the next report." That may not be so easy for the men and women themselves.

## Face present to forgive past

The other day I was talking with some friends. After worrying about the blue whales, the vanishing ozone layer and the new terror in D.C. — Newt — our discussion turned toward the minorities of this country and how one of my friends perceived many of them to be always angry.

Angry over atrocities that were committed a long time ago ... things that are best forgotten now and forgiven eventually. According to this person, unless people forgive and forget, they cannot move ahead.

Good point. But just HOW do you do that?

It is not that easy to forgive nor forget something like centuries of oppression. It does not matter how far into the past it was. As each generation, as each individual, learns about the past, he or she must come to terms with it.

Even though the oppression itself is a thing of the past, the feelings and the emotions some feel as they learn the history of this country and their ancestors' sufferings are very real and very current.

It is the same anger that welled up inside of me when I studied Indian history and read about centuries of oppression and exploitation of the Indian subcontinent by the British. It is the same rage that rises in me when I remember how the communal feelings of the Hindus and Muslims were manipulated against each other in order for the British to gain and maintain control of the country.

Am I still an angry individual? The answer is no. I have dealt with the facts in my own way and have been able to come to terms with my country's past. But then, there has been ample opportunity to do so.



**Vennila Ramalingam**

The difference between an individual dealing with his or her ancestors' history in my country and with someone doing so in the United States is that here one is constantly reminded of the past on a daily basis. If people deny that there is racial discrimination in this country today, then they might as well say that the moon is only a white frisbee that got stuck in the sky!

Also, experiencing such discrimination firsthand (and on a daily basis depending on where one lives and works) does not help people forget the past and heal within.

Last summer, I was at the mall shopping for a makeup base. After living for more than a year here in Nebraska, I now know that shopping for anything suitable for my darker complexion is like shopping for a lunar landing in the lofty heights of Ladakh.

But I didn't know this then, and in pursuit of a polished appearance, I walked into Dillard's and on to the Estee Lauder counter.

The unbelievable started when this beautiful young woman walked over to help me find the right shade. Or so I thought. She was one of the rudest persons I have ever had the misfortune of dealing with.

I eventually recognized the source of her rudeness when she suggested that I was trying to look

"fairer" than I was and that I couldn't have a porcelain face, among other tasteless insensitive things.

My friends asked me why I endured her for as long as I did. The reason was that I really didn't know what was going on. Further, having been in this country only for a very short time then, how could I know how American companies treated their customers?

Or for that matter, what did I know of racism? Having spent all my life until then in India, I had never experienced racial discrimination.

Sexual discrimination, yes. Having been born a female, you bet I have experienced that one universally practiced worldwide phenomenon. But who has heard of makeup companies discriminating against females? Hah, good joke.

I was warned that there was racism in America, but coming face-to-face with it was something else. One of my friends told me that people treated her differently when she was with her Asian mother than when she was with her American father.

It makes my blood boil even today to think of the saleswoman's insults. If I can remember a minor racist incident such as this so vividly that I feel the ugly taste in my mouth, how can one expect a history of genocide, slavery and subjugation to be forgotten?

Move on, yes. But not without dealing with the past. People of all races must come to terms with the past and try to remedy things in the present.

Only then can we talk about forgiving and forgetting.

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## P.S. Write Back

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**Mike Luckovich**