

CHAPTER 22

COPING WITH BELITTLERS

One lesson one learns early in life is that one cannot please everyone. An affliction common to the academic world, and not uncommon elsewhere, is belittling the accomplishments of others, particularly in a direct confrontation with the person being belittled. As a caveat, the responsibility rests with scientists and other members of academe to test a hypothesis or concept thoroughly and to show both its weaknesses and strengths, preferably through additional evidence. This testing of a hypothesis is an integral part of the scientific and academic process, without which confidence in the hypothesis or concept is not strengthened. Ideally, the attack on a hypothesis should be separated as much as possible from an attack on the originator of the hypothesis. Belittling, on the other hand, focuses on the ego of an individual and gives very little attention to the ideas, concepts, or hypotheses.

I am best able to keep belittlers in perspective by observing their tactics to denigrate world-class scholars. Belittlers attempt to do so well outside of concept testing, which is an integral part of the scientific process. Often, they distort statements by not quoting them in context. Another common tactic is to quote another belittler, especially one who has achieved notable stature for personal accomplishment.

My favorite incident involving a belittler occurred when a world-class limnologist was belittled in a variety of ways during the discussion period following a seminar. The belittler was a young, untenured professor who insisted on pointing out the ABCs of limnology to the distinguished speaker, who was a member of the US National Academy of Sciences with a substantial number of other honors. Although I was not present, several people whom I had known for years repeated it to me in virtually identical detail. The distinguished limnologist finally leaned forward on the podium and said, “Young man, take some advice from an old man—get psychiatric help!” I had the dubious honor of being belittled under similar circumstances by the same person under the same conditions. I limited my responses to noting that I was well aware of these alternative hypotheses and, in fact, had published on almost all of them personally. Obviously, my response to the belittler had little effect, although, of course, I was a much less distinguished target.

I have often felt that the best response to belittlers is to remain calm, smile serenely if possible, and continue with the concepts that they attempt to belittle. One can even turn the belittler’s efforts to a personally beneficial purpose. Sometimes, when I feel too fatigued to continue my research without a break, I recall the most irritating belittler (the person described earlier has served this purpose well for over a decade) and find the energy to finish the job.

One of my former students recently wrote to tell me that my method for handling belittlers was working well for him, although sudden retribution is often more satisfying for some people. Since neither approach may have little effect on the behavior of belittlers, the audience can be trusted to judge the validity of the belittler’s remarks. The philosopher Heidegger believed that the self is what we truly care about—if we care about belittlers, we demean ourselves. If belittlers care about “sticking pins in would-be philosophers to watch them deflate,” do they really deserve serious attention? It is one thing to test hypotheses rigorously and quite another to attack the individuals who espouse particular hypotheses. The latter annoy me but deserve no more attention than a mosquito.