

On Getting Our Needs Met
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

This week, I've been perusing a book about the French-born intellectual--he married an American and spent much of his life teaching in American universities--René Girard (1923-2015). The book, *Evolution of Desire: A Life of René Girard*, by Cynthia Haven (Michigan State University Press, 2018). From the book jacket blurb:

Rene Girard was one of the leading thinkers of our era—a provocative sage who bypassed prevailing orthodoxies to offer a bold, sweeping vision of human nature, human history, and human destiny. His oeuvre, offering a “mimetic theory” of cultural origins and human behavior, inspired such writers as Milan Kundera and J.M. Coetzee, and earned him a place among the forty “immortals” of the Académie Française. . . . Drawing on interviews with Girard and his colleagues, *Evolution of Desire* provides an essential introduction to one of the twentieth century's most controversial and original minds.

“[B]old, sweeping vision of human nature, human history, and human destiny.” Perhaps I could have engaged the book more rigorously, but I didn't pick up on anything that grand. I suppose I should think, who am I to question the assessment of the Académie Française, but truth be told, my encounter with Girard's ideas left me with the impression that his most notable talent was getting the world to think he was a bigger deal than he really was. As I was reading along in the book, I flashed on a March, 2012 thought I wrote for this site called “On Unimpressives,” which basically made the point that some people get less, and more, credit from the world than is their due, and that Girard fit into the “more credit” category.

I came away from the Girard biography thinking that when you cut through all the verbiage, mimetic theory comes

down the common-sense, though still vitally important, truth that when trying to get what we want in life we copy—mimic—the way others go about getting these same things.

I tied Girard's idea to psychologist Abraham Maslow's self-actualization theory. Maslow (American, 1908-1970) posited that each of us has needs that are hierarchically ordered: when we satisfy the ones lower on a three-tiered totem pole, as it were, we move on to satisfying the ones next highest up. At the very bottom are safety and sustenance needs—basic survival. Then there is a cluster of needs that have to do with how we relate to our world and ourselves: social approval, sexual gratification, and a sense of self-worth. And last, what Maslow is best known for, self-actualization: realizing our full potential, self-fulfillment.

I'm not sure whether what Maslow calls needs aren't, in many cases, more accurately termed wants. Do we really need social approval? Or do we just want it? Could we live a happy and productive life without sex? Is self-actualization really a need?

The second level of Maslow needs—I'll call them needs—particularly intrigue me: social approval and inclusion (“You're cool, join us for lunch”), positive reputation and status (“Hey, you're somebody special!), sex (“Why don't you come over and we'll listen to some music”), and social self-esteem (“I've made it big in the world!”). They become especially salient, pressing, during our adolescent years. The question becomes how to go about satisfying them. In many instances (here's Girard), we take note of other people basically like us who have satisfied these needs have gone about doing it, and we mimic, copy, them; it worked for him, so it'll work for me.

The premise here is that that approach can lead to major trouble, because what works, or appears to work, for someone else, may well not work for me. Much better than looking at

how someone else does things is looking at how, given who I am, I need to do things.

Reading the Girard biography prompted me to recall a book I read a year ago that, thinking about it now, brought the conclusion in the last paragraph home to me. The book, *What Day is Today? The Story of My Life in the Minor Leagues*, by Kenny Beck (Write Books, 2007). I came upon it in a pile of used books for sale at my local public library. It stood out primarily because author Beck's life in professional baseball's minor leagues was as a pitcher for the Vermont Expos, the lowest-level farm team of the major league Montreal Expos--the franchise has since moved to Washington, D. C. and is now called the Washington Nationals. The Vermont Expos played their games in Burlington, Vermont, where I live. I don't remember Kenny Beck, who was seldom-used relief pitcher his one year with the Expos, but I went to a lot of the team's games that year and probably saw him play. The book was self-published, but I found it superb and recommend it highly.

When Kenny graduated from college, he was selected in the major league draft of amateur players. I misplaced the book, so I don't know precisely in what round Kenny was drafted, but I remember that he was one of the very last players chosen that year. He was an afterthought, someone the Montreal Expos management saw as filling out a minor league roster, not as a player they expected someday to play at the major league level. Kenny didn't see himself in those terms, however. He and his 83-mile-an-hour fast ball (very slow) were going to the big show!

Here was Kenny Beck, with no discernable talent, toiling in the lowest level of the minor leagues in Burlington, Vermont intent on becoming a major league baseball player. There was absolutely no way he was going to succeed, it should have been obvious to him, and indeed, he didn't succeed: he was dropped by Montreal in spring training the

next year and was never caught on with another professional team.

Kenny was clearly a very bright young guy, but not only was his baseball career ambition completely unrealistic, he thought it an immensely laudable line of work to pursue. Kenny truly believed that playing with a ball for a living in front of spectators who see what he and his fellows are doing as an innocuous diversion while drinking beer—a laugh, really—is a vitally significant undertaking, prestigious, even heroic. Wow, his parents and fiancé could travel from Maryland to watch him play! There he was wearing a number to distinguish him from the other players and being told when to play and how to play by the manager and coaches of the team. Playing baseball is at best skilled labor, like a woodworker; there is nothing elevated about it. For that matter, staying with the woodworker comparison, baseball playing doesn't even result in a chest of drawers that can be put to good use; what can you do with a strikeout? There's something very sad about an adult continuing to take a child's game seriously.

At least it seems very sad to me looking at it now. I remember being where Kenny was in his life (he now does the news on a local television station): no talent, no possibility of success, thinking that playing sports is my ticket to success in life. As Kenny did, I got it firmly embedded in my head at a very young age that the way to satisfy my needs (of course I wouldn't have attached Maslow's name to what I experienced, or even the word "needs") by becoming a sports star. My delusion didn't last quite as long for me as it did for Kenny, but it was close: I was 19-20 and still thinking I could become at least a starter on a college team, which was just short of deranged given my meager level of talent and accomplishment as a player. I would have been infinitely better off if I had put my time and energy into doing something else with my life, like focusing on my studies in school, where I had talent.

My best guess is that both Kenny and I saw successful athletes going over big and jumped to the conclusion that we were going to go over big in the same way—wrong.

As I think about it now, sports involvement did have one positive outcome in particular for both Kenny and me: it gave us *hope*. It was a completely irrational hope, it was never going to be realized, but we did have something to hope for. I'll add hope to that second tier of Maslow's need hierarchy. We need, we want, something to hope for in our lives, a dream of some kind. Fantasizing about, going after, sports stardom gives us hope. Few things are worse than being without hope in our lives. It can turn us to alcohol, opioids, junk food, gambling, video games, reality shows on television, the list goes on. That acknowledged, our hopes don't have to be linked to something that is inappropriate given who we are and beyond our grasp.

A central challenge growing up is to identify endeavors we are good at doing and like to do and that are worth doing, worth hoping for. People can live their entire lives without even confronting this challenge: they simply check out how others go about their lives and do the same thing; mimicry rather than, call it, authentic self-direction characterizes their lives. The result too often is frustration, discontent, and a blah life if not outright unhappiness.

What can be done about this?

Children and young adults need help deciding how to satisfy their needs, what to do with their lives, what to aspire to, what to hope for; and, most likely, that help is going to have to come their parents. The media aren't going to do it; they are in the business of selling pipe dreams. Friends and siblings aren't going to do it; they parrot the media. Schools, coaches, politicians, the clergy, intellectuals, and commercial interests have other things on their minds.

What can parents do? In their own ways, they can work toward accomplishing five goals with their children. What

these goals all have in common is they refer the child to his/her own unique being and what follows from that:

1. Promote *self-understanding*. What, really, am I good at? What, really, gives me satisfaction? What, really, is worth devoting my time and energy to?

2. Promote *social and culture understanding with reference to yourself*. Given my class, my race, my gender, my age, and how I appear to people, what does this society/culture tell me is preferable and possible for me to do with my life?

3. Promote the identification of *alternative paths you might take in life*. There's playing center field for the Yankees, and what else? What are the pluses and minuses of all those possibilities for me? What is there for me to hope for in my life?

4. Promote *realism with respect to your life*. What is truly going on with me? What is reasonable to expect will result from my efforts? Over and over, Kenny Beck (and I) rationalized failures—if only this hadn't have happened, if only this other person hadn't done that, next time it will be better.

5. Promote *self-importance*. The conclusion that I really matter, that what I do with my life counts incredibly. If I took myself, my life very, very seriously, what would I do with it? Play sports for a living? What exactly?

I venture to say that if someone had reached out to Kenny Beck and me and supported us in moving in those five directions, we both would have found something better to do with our youth than playing with a ball when we had no particular talent for it and it made something seem vitally important when it was in fact trivial. It's too bad that happened, or better, didn't happen, but it's not too late to start making up for it. We can, now, take on the task of supporting ourselves in honing the five personal capabilities/predilections listed above.

