

Teaching America's children realism and balance

By Mariam Williams
Special to The Courier-Journal

My financial aid package for my senior year in college was almost the same as the other three years had been, except for a minor detail most people reviewing their award letters probably don't even notice: My Stafford loans for that year were unsubsidized. Subsidized loans accrue interest after you graduate. Unsubsidized loans start accruing interest while you're still learning.

A financial aid officer insisted that my education would afford me the ability to get a good job and thereby pay off any interest accrued at any time. I was certain a



Mariam Williams

relented and changed the award offer. No interest until graduation.

You might label the temper tantrum symptomatic of a self-absorbed '80s baby, but the reason I was throwing it makes me anything but a narcissist. I look at the odds against me and say, "Okay. Let's not be overly optimistic." According to Daniel Altman's recent editorial in Newsweek and his

solid future wasn't guaranteed, and I didn't want the unsubsidized loan. After an all-out, unprofessional screaming match, he

interview on PRI's show Q, a narcissist looks at all the overwhelming evidence that clearly states, "This will not work out for you," and replies, "I'm unstoppable."

(In church, we add, "through Christ" to "I'm unstoppable," and we call it faith. Hmm.)

Summarizing Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell's thesis in their book, *The Narcissism Epidemic*, Altman says that Americans' hyper-can-do attitude is destroying the country. It's convincing all of us that we all can and will achieve an uncanny amount of success and wealth in our lives. That makes us vote for people who have already achieved it and not consider people who need the social

services the government funds. One day, we won't want any of our hard-earned wealth to go to taxes, so we vote for people who believe we shouldn't raise them. Ever. Screw those other losers who didn't do what they should've done to get where we will be.

I see evidence of Altman's argument, but as I listened to him suggest that the answer is to teach our children not to be selfish, I was appalled at what we might have to tell them to get the desired results: Remember your place. Don't dream big. Some things aren't meant for people like you. You seen anybody else in our neighborhood go to college? You can't. I know what Philippians 4:13 and

Luke 1:37 say, but baby, don't get your hopes up.

People say that to kids all the time, and unless someone else intervenes, those kids don't believe in themselves. They aim low, and we all suffer for it.

I'm sure none of the authors were suggesting we use such detrimental language, but if the self-obsession that started in the 1960s convinced some people who otherwise never would've believed in themselves that they were capable of greatness, it wasn't all bad.

I support teaching our children realism and balance. Baby, superstardom — be it Steve Jobs' industry or Beyoncé's — is rare. It takes years to perfect. It's hard. If you're one of the millions of

people who never gets a lucky break (also known as opportunity), you'll never get there. And most people who are already there want to keep it an exclusive club. If you're not already like them in blood, color or class, don't count on them for help. So don't be like them. As you move up the corporate ladder, reach down and take somebody else with you. Don't forget that anyone's life can change in a split second; your life could look like theirs tomorrow. (Or as we say in church, "But for the grace of God, there go I.")

Mariam Williams is a writer who lives in Louisville. More of her writing can be found at RedboneAfropuff.com.