

No Excuses Sir! Freedom Follows Individual Responsibility

Gaylord Swim

In recent years, I have had to learn to temper my views somewhat from those I held earlier in life. It is easy to dream of the ideals of constitutional government but much harder to find workable solutions to our pressing policy issues which move us in an orderly way toward those ideals. I haven't lost those ideals, at least I hope not, but I am learning that the real trial of our faith and character comes in taking responsibility for ourselves and learning to live the truth daily. How easy it is for us who have not been in political office to fret and stew about those who are and who seem to have strayed from our personal interpretation of the Constitution. But how hard it is to govern ourselves in accordance with the highest of all constitutions — the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We seem to live at a time in modern history when our culture is running away from personal responsibility. The culture of irresponsibility is modeled by Hollywood and Broadway, for in the realm of fantasy actors can play out the part of license yet have no sense of guilt because the perversion portrayed, after all, is only make believe. Yet how many viewers of entertainment see their own moral resolve weakened by witnessing this perversion? It is not innocent. Recently I came across a quote from the Hollywood mogul Samuel Goldwyn. He said, "The most important thing in acting is honesty. Once you've learned to fake that, you're in." [1]

A few years ago my wife, Laurie, was summoned for jury duty at the federal court in Salt Lake City. She wanted to do her civic duty and agreed to appear. The case consisted of a lawsuit brought by a woman against General Motors. The facts of the case were these: An unmarried couple in a Chevy Blazer, driving through the night without adequate rest, decided to change drivers while the vehicle was cruising down the highway. Predictably the vehicle swerved, the driver over-corrected and rolled the Blazer. The woman sustained major injuries and will be disabled the remainder of her life. Instead of recognizing the consequences of her and her boyfriend's foolishness, she chose to sue General Motors for building an unsafe vehicle. A tragic situation was made all the more tragic by an attempt to place responsibility upon another.

Another example: One of the epidemics of our time is the fad of "learning disabilities." If a child is labeled with some disorder, then everyone – the teacher, the parent and even the child – is absolved of personal responsibility. At American Heritage School we have pled with parents and counseled our teachers to never label a child as learning disabled, A.D.D. or A.D.H.D. or whatever. Certainly some children, often the very brightest, have problems sitting still and concentrating on their assignments. But character is developed by learning to control ourselves and doing that which does not come easily, and doing it until it is done right.

In reality the greatest handicap a child may ever have is to believe that he or she is in fact disabled and need not bother to even try. We all have weaknesses – that is mortality – and

it is the great triumph in mortality when we humble ourselves and gain the resolve to overcome those weaknesses rather than rationalize them away as being outside of our control.

When our oldest son Stanford was born, his eyes would cross regularly; but a doctor cautioned us to treat him no differently than any other child and then our son would do just fine. My son's eyes still cross when he is tired, and he still doesn't have depth perception; it is not easy for him to catch a baseball; but he does drive a car, enjoys hiking, plays racquetball when he can find time, is very accomplished on the piano, and no one – including himself – would consider him to be handicapped or disabled.

Another example of our irresponsibility culture is the diet pill. Rather than take the appropriate steps of changing our lifestyle, learning to eat better and obtain regular exercise, we want to change our physiques without changing our habits. Look how much is spent on diet gimmicks that have no lasting value because the individual has not made any real changes internally!

Is it not the great temptation of this mortal state to run from responsibility just at that very moment when we are at the brink of an opportunity for growth? All character growth comes by taking responsibility for ourselves – to act and not to be acted upon – to choose the right when the choice is placed before us and exhibit integrity in the face of temptation to do otherwise. This is the stuff of which true heroes are made and the reason why in today's culture there are so few true heroes. To courageously rise above the natural or manmade limitations imposed on us is the definition of heroism.

We are becoming a nation of self-appointed victims. The fault, we say, is outside of ourselves. It is those darn bankers, democrats, lobbyists, or bureaucrats. If we are truly victims, then all solutions are outside of our control or influence. This cultural pattern has been most cruelly perpetuated among the poor and the minorities. Politicians and social workers have blamed society for the plight of the unfortunate. If these unfortunate people come to believe those voices from their want-to-be leaders, they will become their pawns never seeing themselves as capable of pulling themselves out of the slums. They will be captive to the whims of the politician and bureaucrat who have a vested interest in keeping them in their current condition. J. Reuben Clark referred to this self-serving behavior as a “fervid but false solicitude for the unfortunate over whom they thus gain mastery, and then enslave them.”[2]

But self-appointed victims enslave themselves. They are victims of their own illusions. Thus we see the therapeutic society gain ascendancy, and we now treat poor choices as diseases, bad habits as genetic conditions, and we turn to government for our cures because we see no other way. In so doing, personal freedom wanes.

My friend, Jack Wheatley, told me that the greatest character lesson he learned from the military academy at West Point was the phrase, “No excuses, Sir!” Cadets were taught, at least in his day, that if a superior officer inspected a soldier's uniform and found something out of order or the lessons were not completed on time, the only acceptable

response to the officer's inquiry was "No excuses, Sir!" Consider a soldier's training and one can quickly see how important individual responsibility is – to do one's duty, regardless of apparent opposition, means just that: individual responsibility. No excuses allowed.

It is in taking personal responsibility that we can achieve personal freedom. There is no other way.

I recall as a seventh grader over the Thanksgiving Holiday my father reviewed my less-than-stellar report card and had some stern questions. I still remember breaking down into tears, blaming my awful English teacher. My "mean old dad" did not buy my excuse, and so there was no way out but to learn English. I have never learned more about the English language before or since thanks to a good teacher and a father who loved me enough to expect the best from me.

My father also taught me another vital lesson. "Son," he would say, "if you want to get ahead in life, don't worry about what you are paid or what your title or position is. Just take on more responsibility, and you will rise to the top." I have found that counsel to be true over and over again. Society loves people who will take responsibility, and doors will open that stay closed to others who never learn that lesson. This is also true in civic matters.

Perhaps I have labored the point too much. Yet it is this culture of irresponsibility which strikes at the very center of the battle to preserve freedom. The allure of irresponsibility is greater now, I believe, than ever before in all of human history.

Each of us here yearns for freedom and is concerned about the apparent erosion of freedom in subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

But, what is freedom?

If freedom only consists of the absence of external restraint or opposition, then none of us will ever be free. Everywhere we turn there are natural and manmade restraints. And that is good. Time constrains us; oceans and mountains restrain us; our physical limitations, our ignorance, our bad habits, our age and even gravity constrain us. Rules of civil society constrain us, as does civil law. In fact it is just those constraints that give us the opportunity for freedom. We could not stand were it not for gravity. We could not run were it not for friction. Were it not for death, how could we value life? It is those very limits and constraints that give us the opportunity and the necessity to choose.

Real freedom, then, is the privilege of moral agency – the freedom to choose our response and to be held accountable for that choice. Freedom does not guarantee there will be no crop failures. Though the size of the crop harvested can be influenced by the farmer's labor, the harvest is still dependent on many factors outside his control. So it is with all of our endeavors. If we focus too much on what we get from freedom and not enough on what we give for freedom, we will probably never be very productive, nor

happy, nor value the freedom we do have.

Viktor Frankl wrote of his great awakening while in a Nazi concentration camp. I quote:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. . . .

Even though conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food and various mental stresses may suggest that the inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone.[3]

How then can we be an instrument in preserving and expanding freedom? It is in taking responsibility first for ourselves, for our present stewardship, and then taking on additional responsibility as God gives us opportunities to do so. Often our frustrations and our failures to make a positive difference stem from trying to reach too far and overlooking opportunities close to home. Remember, we are not called to save the world. There is one greater than us all who has already done that. Rather, it is for us to be good stewards.

There is a wonderful saying, which goes something like: "I am one, but only one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something; and I will not fail to do that which I can do." There is great wisdom in that thought. Great emancipating truth.

Each of you, I suspect, is hoping to make a difference in this community, state or nation. That is why you are here today. You want to become informed so that you may more wisely focus your time and attention and increase the probability of success in your quest to make this a little better world. I commend you for that desire. I truly hope that nothing I have said will lessen your will to work for positive change. It is my hope that perhaps my remarks will give you a little clearer vision of how and where you might best put forth your efforts.

Here is a short list of things you can do to take personal responsibility, which in turn can impact our community, state and nation:

Make personal study of history, of biography, of political principles a habit.

Teach your children about correct principles of government.

Insofar as it is possible, put your own house in order so that you are less likely to be compromised by difficult times to come.

Become an informed voter.

Attend party caucus meetings and make a positive contribution.

Support financially and with your time responsible candidates and organizations

effectively furthering the cause of liberty.

Volunteer to assist someone in government office or in a position of influence.

Consider running for political office using a positive, solution-oriented platform.

When we do well with what is already within our own reach, I am convinced that doors will open to us – often not of our own seeking – where our opportunity to influence others will increase. Remember the parable of the talents.[4] When we prove our faithfulness in a small stewardship, we will be given a greater stewardship and so our influence expands.

So as we go forward in our own individual or collective efforts, let us again recall: (1) Individual freedom is born of individual responsibility; and (2) political, economic and religious freedom is best achieved and made secure in a culture of responsibility – the collective sum of individuals taking personal responsibility.

It is easy to blame others. Faultfinders are just like seismic scientists (if you'll excuse the pun); they passively record the tremors and map the faults but have no ability to prevent the next earthquake.

Let us rather be responsibility seekers, among those who quietly and humbly through the power of personal effort and example are able to step forward with positive solutions to today's problems, beginning with our own homes.

Now, in closing, perhaps I might quote from the first Thanksgiving Proclamation under the Constitution of 1787. It was penned by George Washington on October 3rd, 1789, and it declared:

...the 26th day of November next, to be devoted by the people of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being who is the beneficent author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be; that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people of this country

And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations, and beseech Him to pardon our national and other tran[s]gressions; to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually; to render our National Government a blessing to all the people by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed; to protect and guide all sovereigns and nations (especially such as have shown kindness to us), and to bless them with good governments, peace, and concord; to promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the increase of science among them and us; and generally, to grant unto all mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as He alone knows to be best.[5]

May we, like many who have gone before us, humble ourselves, show gratitude, take responsibility for our national and other sins, and acknowledge our dependence upon God for all the blessings we do enjoy. Let us focus on what we can do and do it. Then we will

be worthy of whatever measure of freedom He sees fit to bestow upon us. Then will we be able to stand before our Maker and say “No excuses, Sir!” because none will be necessary. We will have done our part.

Thank you

[1] Forbes, 28 December 1998, 152.

[2] James R. Clark, compiler. Messages of the First Presidency, vol. 6 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1970), 151.

[3] Viktor E. Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), 86-87.

[4] Matthew 25:14-30.

[5] A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, vol. I (New York: Bureau of National Literature, Inc., 1897), 56.