

## The importance of Cultivating Responsibility through Education

Responsibility – or the lack thereof – is at the root of today’s most critical issues:

- Fiscal misconduct and irresponsibility on the part of national, international, and sovereign economic institutions, commercial financial institutions, and individuals
- Growing political polarization and religious extremism leading to regional destabilization and unwillingness to work cooperatively to address pervasive common problems (resulting in death of innocent people through acts of terrorism, famine, ethnic conflict, etc.)
- Rampant greed unabated by concern for the economically disenfranchised
- Political intransigence and obstructionism without seeming regard for the dire need to address real and pressing problems.

If you want to know who is responsible – *look in the mirror*. In our democracy we enjoy the privilege of representative government. We elect our representatives, and the ballot box and public opinion influence the action, or inaction, of our representatives.

Notwithstanding our ultimate responsibility, many still feel powerless and unable to make a difference. What can we do and where do we start?

The first step is, truly believing that we really are responsible. We are each responsible for our own personal welfare, the welfare of our families, communities, and, ultimately, we are individually and collectively responsible for the quality of life within our nation and the sustainability of the planet.

Celebrated documents, including our own Declaration of Independence, have specified what this means – most are phrased in terms of the *rights and freedoms* that we must establish and preserve in order to ensure personal security and basic opportunity. The most fundamental of these inalienable rights form the platform upon which all others depend:

- Life: life, security of person, no torture or inhuman treatment, etc.
- Liberty: including a number of essential freedoms (e.g., expression, movement, association, no unlawful imprisonment, etc.)
- Livelihood: the right to pursue the means of making a living.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948 does a nice job of setting out a more comprehensive list.

How many of us – how many others around the world – *thoroughly appreciate* our individual responsibilities for providing for life, liberty, and livelihood? How many of us know *how* to pursue those responsibilities in our daily lives? Unfortunately, I believe the answer to both questions is “very few.”

Therefore, we share an additional responsibility for *education* – ensuring that there is effective education that, among other important things, provides everyone with a thorough understanding of the nature and specifics of being responsible. As in the case of life, liberty, and livelihood, quality education that cultivates a thorough sense of responsibility must be guaranteed and provided to all peoples of the world.

An education system that is proficient at cultivating a thorough understanding of individual, civic and moral responsibility is absolutely essential for dealing with all of the critical issues that confront us today – and that will continue to confront us in decades and centuries to come. Certainly, our education system should provide the tools of logical, rational thought and decision-making. A well-designed education system should also provide the tools for lifelong learning and for investigation and intelligent research when we are faced with new problems and situations. But, merely learning the tools without appreciation for our responsibilities for using these tools is grossly insufficient – might I say *irresponsible*.

Quality education helps us to cultivate an accurate and comprehensive understanding about the interconnectivity of life and the interrelationships present in our physical universe and our social, economic, and political systems. Truly appreciating the nature and specifics of responsibility is required to inculcate the *obligation* to exercise responsible decision-making to benefit individuals, family units, business organizations, our communities, and the world in which we live.

Right now our educational Three-Rs are: reading, writing, and arithmetic (the fact that two of these do not begin with the letter “R” might be a red flag). A new Three-Rs for education is needed to provide emphasis to the required shift in thinking:

- Responsibility: understanding and accepting individual responsibility for stewardship of the planet, the preservation of life, the exercise and protection of freedoms and liberty, providing opportunity for the pursuit of a livelihood, and knowledge of what actions individuals can, and should, take to exercise their responsibilities
- Reason: rational, logical thought and decision-making, and the exercise of discernment (critical thinking)
- Research: the skills for continuing learning and finding the answers to questions on an as-needed basis.

Among the important and current concerns within the educational arena today is the effort to identify and define the correct criteria to measure the success and performance of our educational systems. The new Three-Rs can be used as effectiveness criteria to evaluate success in fulfilling the fundamental purpose of our educational endeavors.

Are our priorities in keeping with the purpose and importance of education suggested above? Shouldn't they be? Don't we have a *responsibility* to see that they are?

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