

Concepts of Responsibility and Courtesy

By Louis P. Solomon

Courtesy to others and responsibility for your own actions are the fundamental bases for successful interactions among human beings. It is my perception that these concepts and their implementation in our daily lives is crucial to our continuing interactions with others. However I find that courtesy and responsibility for one's own actions seem to be less and less prominent in today's world, and I think that the world is much for worse for it.



A direct quote gives an idea of what I mean: "The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers." Sound familiar? Agrees with your own observations? This quote was attributed to Socrates (469–399 B.C.) so you can see the problem is not new.

But I am not focusing on children; I am talking about how we deal with other human beings. In the current world there are always new things to amuse us, but the ability to have a pleasant experience with your fellow human beings is based upon the courtesy that must exist among all people. An example of the sort of behavior that I see, and is becoming a national problem on our highways, is that people don't stop at stop signs, but rather either ignore them or glide through them. You may say that is a pretty poor example; I am talking about the human race and use an example of a person not stopping at a stop sign. Rousseau wrote about *The Social Contract*. What I take this to mean is that if human beings are to live in a functioning society, then there must be certain agreements that are made between all members of society for the preservation of themselves as well as society as a whole. Just because you can drive a car does not allow you to drive without regard to the rules. If you regularly drive through stop signs then another driver will eventually hit you with possible disastrous consequences. So all drivers, for their own safety as well as that of others, have to obey the traffic regulations and stop at stop signs.

In the same vein I suggest to you that the astonishing emphasis on winning in all phases of life is getting out of hand. Being "Number One" is considered of the same importance as pursuing the search for the Holy Grail. Let me make myself clear: when you participate in a sporting event it is part of the game that you make every reasonable effort to win. You learn the rules, practice, train with your teammates, and, in general, do the very best you possibly can to emerge the winner. But what if you don't win? Is it the end of your life? The world? Civilization as we know it? Hardly. I agree that that all reasonable efforts should be made to win. But your actions should have a limit. There are unacceptable actions. If you win by cheating, for example, is that acceptable behavior? In the current mania for winning, it seems to me that the only thing that counts is winning. I reject that philosophy! I believe acceptable behavior requires that you win without cheating.

Professional athletics is devoted to making money through providing entertainment. Amateur athletics, as played at different levels, has other goals in different degrees. These include training junior athletes

who play for fun, more senior athletes who support their high schools, and college athletes who hope for a professional career, perhaps. In the final analysis, however, it is for entertainment. We all should try to win, but not at the expense of our self-respect. Unfortunately, I believe that the stress to win—being number one—has pervaded into parts of our life other than sports.

Consider the federal government and our Congress. The posture of most of the members of Congress seems to be to win at all costs. The recent issue of considering the approval of federal judges is such an example. The potential crushing of the minority opinion by the majority is a continuation of the importance of winning. I understand that the different wings of the two major political parties believe passionately in their own credos. Religious conservatives (and others) have the right to believe what they wish and work hard to implement their beliefs in concrete laws. Even so, there are others who are not religious conservatives who aren't quite sure, or don't agree with them. Are these doubters to be crushed under the heel of the religious conservative movement?

Before many of you send me complaints about my apparent criticism of the religious conservative movement, let me clarify my point. You may substitute the words “secular liberal” everywhere I have used the term “religious conservative” and I make the same argument. In fact, you can substitute the term “people who believe in the flat earth” or who insist that “the only way to eat peas is on the blade of a knife.” The point I am trying to make is the necessity for allowing different points of view to exist, flourish, and rise or fall on their own merits and in doing so be treated with the same respect as that reserved for your believers.

As was pointed out so well by Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The nearer you come into relation with a person, the more necessary do tact and courtesy become.” In the current world, and apparently in the world from Socrates to the present, this seems to be true always. We should work at it.