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Lately, I feel like I'm surrounded by a wall of jerks.

A loud, annoying guy on my right. A loud, annoying guy on my left.

I admit I've met a few women who could give Rush Limbaugh how-to-be-a-jerk lessons, but the fact remains that most jerks are men and a great deal of their self-esteem is based on their possession of a dick. Regardless of who they are, all jerks derive their obnoxious quotient from the same source: the Loud Male Voice.

The Loud Male Voice is another variation of the many linguistic privileges enjoyed by men in our

Shove macho aside

Women have the right to have their voices heard

society. It's encouraged in elementary schools, where boys receive more attention than girls. They squirm and shout, while girls — who've been taught to be quiet — still are ignored. It's why studies show that in conversations, men interrupt women at far greater rates than women interrupt men. It's why you can address a group of women and men as "Hey, guys." I do it myself, but that doesn't make it right. If you think the "Hey, guys" habit is harmless, try addressing a mixed group as "Hey, gals" and watch the reaction.

How can you escape the dominance of the Loud Male Voice? You can respectfully express your disagreement — and be ignored. You see, a jerk's idea of dialogue is akin to Geraldo Rivera's idea of journalism. Decibel level, not substance, is what counts. It's a mad rush for the

microphone and whoever can shout the loudest wins. Score another victory for the jerks.

Some believe that jerks should be tolerated, that all opinions deserve equal respect. So if a University of Nebraska-Lincoln student feels the need to display his insecurity about his own sexuality by coming to class with a homophobic slogan emblazoned across his shirt, then I'm supposed to keep my mouth shut and respect his right to "free speech."

Well, I'm sorry. Your right to express your bigotry stops when it interferes with my right to attend class in a safe environment. Likewise, the right of the Cleveland "Indians" to crank out merchandise adorned with racist caricatures stops with the right of native peoples to live in this society without being bombarded by images that

dehumanize their existence. The right of creeps to stand on a corner and croon, "Hey, baby," while scratching their crotches stops with a woman's right to walk to the grocery store at night without the constant fear of being raped or harassed.

Sure, this is more of the politically correct stuff, and I'm actually advocating it. When people insist that language be used responsibly and that abusive words be removed from our schools and workplaces, then the jerks accuse them of wielding "political correctness" to squash free speech.

Now I can be as sanctimonious about the First Amendment as any American, but I'm surprised how sentimental and loyal I feel toward words penned by a bunch of privileged white guys 206 years ago. But the Constitution doesn't protect

unrestricted speech. "You can't yell 'fire' in a crowded theater," is one rule of thumb credited to the former Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. In other words, you can't say whatever you feel like saying. You can't falsely claim that there's a fire in a crowded hall because in the mad rush for the exits other people will be trampled underfoot. Yet jerks passionately defend their First Amendment "right" to let hatred drip from their lips and trample the souls of their fellow human beings.

What the jerks are whining about is mild compared to what those of us living under the oppressions of sexism, homophobia, and racism experience from members of our society everyday. Our self-esteem and dignity have been assaulted since the day we were born and we have long been intimidated into silence.

If true free speech is to reign in our society, every voice must be given an equal chance to be heard. The Loud Male Voice has to stop hogging the microphone.

Blame it on the rain

Take responsibility for your actions

Keep your ears open for people talking about something that wasn't their fault. While you're at it, check your own conversations. Do you hear things like: It's the professor's fault that someone didn't get assigned reading finished. It's the roommate's fault someone didn't get to study last night. It's the parent's fault that someone didn't have enough cash to buy books. Odds are strong that you'll hear, or even say, some of these exact statements.

All around us, people blame the closest possible scapegoat for their own lack of responsibility. An attitude that blames others and complains at the slightest hint of adversity is at its very core an attitude of selfishness. When you blame someone else for your own mistakes, you are blinded by pride into thinking you couldn't be the one at fault.

Of course there are times when we really aren't at fault, but the blame disease has infected us so much that personal responsibility has been somehow lost along the way.

With the right lawyer, I could probably win about \$500,000 off my sister today. She should have known that picking on me could have resulted in a near fatal injury. Her antagonism caused me to grow up misguided with a deep sense of being unloved. It really was her fault!

But, back in reality, the dark gray-colored scar remains in my sister's shoulder and I know the truth: It was my fault. I still struggle to take responsibility in my life. But I refuse to be forced by circumstances into blaming others for my own mistakes. It's a choice that I made.

To hear people blaming roommates for a lack of study time is a small example, true. But blame in the little aspects of your life quickly turns into blame in all aspects of your life. In the few years you spend in college, you don't just gain knowledge and marketable skills and make lifelong friends, you determine what kind of a man or woman you

will be for the rest of your life. The patterns inculcated into your minds now will dictate the actions you take in the future.

So what kind of

responsibility will you take for your own actions? You're the only person who can respond to that question. And you can't blame the result on anyone but yourself.



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My sister has lead in her shoulder. It isn't from a bullet, but the sharpened end of a pencil.

I put it there.

One day, back when I was a little tyke, my older sister was picking on me. We were riding in the family car, I was in the back seat. Well, she called me a little dork, and since I had no idea what "dork" meant, I assumed it was something really bad. My pulse quickened, my fists clenched, that was enough. Whatever a "dork" was, I surely wasn't one. I knew retaliation was my best course of action. She turned around and I took advantage of the situation, deciding it would be a good idea to see how far I could slam a pencil into her back. Turns out that was about half an inch, but that's beside the point. It was easily the most carnal act of my preschool years and to this day I don't know what possessed me to do it. But what I'll never forget about the whole stabbing incident is what I told my mother as she frantically asked me why I had maimed my sister.

"It wasn't my fault," I said.

"Whose was it?" she asked.

"Hers."

Uh-huh. Sure it was. I was young. I was stupid. I was wrong.

The stabbing was entirely my fault and I was simply trying to formulate an excuse in the recesses of my 5-year-old brain. Pretty pathetic attempt, I know. But when you compare that excuse to some of the blame-shifting present in society today, it doesn't seem that unreasonable.

It's becoming more evident when you look closely at our culture, that the blaming game is becoming a national pastime. Taking responsibility for our actions has disappeared faster than you can spill hot coffee on yourself and sue the restaurant that sold it to you.

It's not limited to a few instances, though. Run an experiment for yourself this week. As you go about your business for the next few days, take some time and listen to conversations.

