

Who's responsible?

The privileged owe society for their advantages



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Take a little responsibility. Those are words I hear time and again from some of my more conservative-minded friends. They're usually directed at welfare recipients or the like. They say this because they believe that anyone who has to live off of the works of others is being lazy and is unwilling to take a little responsibility.

It's also something our parents tell us over and over again, and what our parents' generation says is our generation's problem. They claim we're lazy, unwilling to do what's necessary, and that we just need to buckle down and take a little responsibility.

In fact, just about everyone seems to say it about everyone else. And those who say it the most often

act like they owe nothing to anyone. As if they are the ones who suffer the most, who have the most taken away from them.

Wallow in it, says the righteous, hard-working, upper-middle-class citizen to the poverty-stricken, uneducated drug addict who whiles away his days doing God knows what. If you're in this position, you obviously got yourself into it. You didn't work as hard as I did in school. You didn't take the initiative to go out and get a job. You were stupid enough to get hooked on that junk. You aren't my responsibility.

This despite the fact that this hard-working citizen was most likely born into his income group. Nevermind the stories you hear about people who work their way up from the bottom. Simply put, the vast majority of people stay in the income level into which they were born. This is because they had the resources of that income level to work with. They had parents to serve as examples and as sources of instruction and advice. They went to schools that were funded by well-off parents, and grew up in an environment where people had leisure time to teach things that went beyond basic survival. This hard-working citizen grew up in a society that practically handed him the means to become what he is on a

platter, unlike the one he mocks.

Oh, but it's not mocking. I forgot. He's just showing righteous frustration. And it is easy to get frustrated because it's natural for us to assume that everyone has had a life like our own. A life with the same opportunities. The same abilities. It all comes down to choices, right?

OK, maybe it isn't all fair, says the righteous hard worker. But I don't owe him. I don't owe anyone. It's not my fault if things are unequal.

And this is where I divide my attack.

1) "I don't owe him." You're right. As an individual, you don't owe this person anything. You don't know him, you maybe haven't even seen him, and nothing you do directly affects him, either for good or for ill. But ...

2) "I don't owe anyone." Pardon me? What about those parents I mentioned above? What about those schools I mentioned above? What about the society that is so incredibly wealthy that it is able to give you all of these things? A society that is able to give you a workweek of 40 hours and leisure beyond belief? A society with medical technology that will keep you alive almost twice as long as your ancestors? A society that has given you more than you could pos-

sibly repay in a lifetime?

And you owe nobody? Wrong, you owe society. Don't worry, society won't ask all that much of you, because the rest of society doesn't want to give up things any more than you do. But it will ask you to give enough so other people can get to where you are. This means providing a few basics, like schools, maintainable roads and the ability to at least keep everyone alive and reasonably healthy. This is how you repay those countless people that gave you what you have: You help give others the same chance.

3) "It's not my fault things are unequal." You're right. It's not. Very few people out there consciously want things to be unequal, and those who do are as much a product of the faceless inequality as the poor. Maybe you do things in your life to make the situation worse, but you probably don't realize it. I'm not asking you to feel guilty about the way things are.

But you could at least take a little responsibility.

That means not dismissing that drug addict on the street as a loser unworthy of your attention. I'm not telling you to give him any of your money, or even to help him. I'm telling you to treat him with an ounce of respect and dignity. You'd

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be surprised what might — and can — follow.

That means realizing what a good position you're actually in to be able to sit and pass judgment. That means maybe knocking off the whining a little when you see the deductions on your paycheck, or when you hear about the 1 percent or so of those deductions that are going to that drug addict and those like him.

That means going through your life with a little awareness, even if it makes you uncomfortable.

It means, take a little responsibility.



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I'm a terrible son. This past weekend, I committed the Exxon Valdez of son mistakes: I forgot my mother's birthday. Now you might be saying, "Steve, forgetting your mother's birthday does not make you a terrible son. What makes you a terrible son is the fact that you twice forgot if she was still living or not."

And to that, I shall defend myself by replying, "Yeah, that too."

But I've never felt as bad about forgetting something as I did when I missed Mom's birthday last Saturday. I don't know how it happened. I was busy, I guess. Or maybe I was daydreaming. I do that a lot, you know, and it's usually the reason I miss appointments.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Last week, Steve claimed he missed his deadline because he had been daydreaming about appearing before a federal judge with a stalk of celery in his navel.)

Regardless of how it happened, I did it. I missed the birthday of the woman who gave me life. I've never felt so ashamed. But in my defense, I only missed her birthday by a mere 48 hours. I quickly found out, however, that 48 hours is not just a long time for prison sentences. In mom time, it's an eternity.

When I first realized I was late, I instinctively began to contemplate excuses. Basically, I had two types of excuses I could try. There were excuses she would believe but be upset over, such as my being stuck in a dishwasher for the past week. Or I could try a completely unbelievable excuse that she at least could tell her friends about. For this, I am thinking along the lines of, "Sorry I missed your birthday, Mom. I was sooo busy cooking meals for one-eyed homeless children that I completely forgot what day it was."

But the excuse I chose was one I had learned from my father. I had wit-

nessed him successfully use this excuse hundreds of times during the years he was married to Mom. It worked when Mom walked in on one of his out-of-control football parties (a party in which Mom encountered several nude, drunk men beating a Buffalo Bills blanket with tennis rackets). And it worked when Dad inadvertently caused our house to explode after showing his children the "improper" way to shoot flames out of an aerosol can.

Indeed, it's an excuse all men have used at some point in their lives: The old "I'm-Just-a-Guy" excuse. The reason I opted for this excuse was because it was really the reason why I missed her birthday. The fact is, I am just a guy. And we all know guys are perhaps the most simple of all God's creations, especially when it comes to remembering important dates, where we rank only slightly above a can of kidney beans.

It's not that I don't care about Mom; I do. I proved that when I repeatedly defended her honor on junior-high playgrounds. (Incidentally, this occurred a couple of days ago.) So she knows it. But man, did I ever dread that two-day-late phone call. Now, my mom is a very forgiving and understanding person; you can't give birth to a creature like me and not be one. But she still gets painfully upset over this type of forgetfulness, understandably.

But here's the deal: Birthdays just aren't a big deal to guys. In my 23 years of life, my dad has only been able to successfully remember my birthday once. And that was in 1974 — the

year of my birth. And he sort of had to remember that one because, at the time, my in-labor mother was leading him to the car by his nostrils. Nowadays, Dad forgets the day and month of my birthday. And as far as my father is concerned, my age is determined by asking the post-office clerk to randomly pick a number between seven and 40.

But it doesn't bother me any. I know how guys are when it comes to remembering sentimental dates. Women on the other hand can remember important dates as quickly as President Clinton can forget them. My mom is capable of remembering when and where my first sneeze took place. Dad has trouble remembering where I currently live.

I don't

know how women do it, really. I never see them jotting down notes during conversations. Do you? Personally, I don't think they're any better at remembering dates than men; women are just smarter. They realize that they can ascribe any memory to any date, and men will never challenge it because, first and foremost, they

weren't aware such a date existed.

Wife: "Honey? You know what today is, don't you?"

Husband (Silently thinking to himself): "OK. It's hot out, so it's not Christmas. So it's got to be ... THINK DAMMIT!"

Wife (Excitedly): "Today is the third anniversary of the first time you and I ever shared an entire pot of coffee together!"

Husband: "It is? Er — Of course it is! Happy coffee day, dear?"

I know I'm not alone in this problem because I have heard of companies that specialize in reminding males of their emotional obligations.

Unfortunately, I'm unable to locate any. So if any of you are interested in making a few extra bucks, and more importantly, saving me from ever forgetting my mother's birthday again, please contact me.

Leave a note down at the DN. I'll try to remember to get back to you.

Forget-Mom-not

Remembering birthdays a chore for guys



MATT HANEY/DN