

Taking Responsibility

The most dreaded disease of our generation was Poliomyelitis. You probably remember the newsreels showing polio victims being kept alive, forever trapped in their “iron lungs.” In high school I knew two kids who had had polio and survived, but they were partially paralyzed, and would be for the rest of their days.

Then in the late 1950s Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin developed vaccines which would immunize us all against polio. Sabin’s was an oral vaccine. In about 1962, when I was a student at Cal, it was made widely available. Here’s how it worked.

The University set up tables in front of Sproul Hall, and on those tables they placed tiny paper cups. In each cup was a sugar cube. Within each sugar cube was the Sabin vaccine. Through notices in the campus newspaper, the Daily Cal, all campus personnel were notified of the availability of the vaccine-laced sugar cubes and advised to drop by the tables in front of Sproul Hall and take one sugar cube. There were no prescriptions, no event monitors, no IDs to be shown, no proof of age required, no liability waivers to be signed---just do it. We were on our own to make sure we took the vaccine. And we were also on our own to make sure we took only one sugar cube, not multiple doses.

Friends of mine who lived elsewhere in the country at that time report having had roughly the same experience.

The point here is that each person was responsible for his own actions and decisions. Now fast-forward to present-day America, where no one is personally responsible but instead looks for someone else to blame.

A woman won a \$2.86-million judgment against McDonalds after she scalded herself by spilling her coffee; she claims the coffee should not have been so hot. Another woman is suing Carnival Cruise lines because she got drunk and fell overboard; she claims Carnival should be responsible because their bartender continued serving her drinks when she was “extremely intoxicated.” A woman sued WalMart because she tripped and fell in their store; she had tripped over *her own* child. A man sued the property owner after he fell through the skylight of a building he was burglarizing. There are similar stories of litigious shoppers who broke or spilled jars and then slipped on the spill they themselves created.

What’s behind such examples is the mindset that if something bad happens, then someone else must be responsible. And this is not just the mindset of the “victims” but also of society at large---as represented by the juries that grant awards to such people.

A possible clue to this take-no-responsibility mindset may be found in how the government approaches individual responsibility. Arguably, the government has been encouraging citizens not to be responsible since its launch of the war on poverty. But here are some more recent examples of how the government has encouraged dependency over personal responsibility.

The government pushes participation in programs such as food stamps. CNNMoney reports “More than one in seven Americans are on food stamps, but the federal government wants even more people to sign up....running radio ads....encouraging those eligible to enroll.”

Similarly, the government has pushed other welfare related programs, measuring its success by how many are dependent rather than by how many are responsible for themselves. At the same time, the government has bailed out financial institutions, “underwater” homeowners, and corporations which had built cars people didn’t want.

And further discouraging personal responsibility, the government now requires that “children” be covered under their parents’ health insurance until age 26.

There are surely other societal forces which have contributed to the take-no-responsibility phenomenon. For example, there has been a three-decade boom in advertising by attorneys, proliferation of lawsuits, and escalation of awards. Attorneys are on TV urging “you may be entitled to compensation” while the government is also advertising its dependency programs. So there are significant forces discouraging personal responsibility. And personal responsibility is no longer in vogue.

But even if you reject any such nexus, the societal change itself is undeniable. When we took the Sabin vaccine in 1962, we were on our own---many of us not even legally adults. We did it without prescriptions, event monitors, IDs, proof of age, or liability waivers.

You can’t imagine such a thing happening today.

jslittig@aol.com