

## Responsible

Somewhere deep inside of me I must have known that I really didn't understand what I was doing. I was just a kid who had learned how to get on and off a subway and cash a paycheck and pay bills, but I really didn't know enough to be responsible for someone's welfare.

A half century ago there were just the two of us twenty year olds from upstate living in Manhattan for a year. In the evening we walked everywhere. Down Broadway through Times Square, the bright lights and animated signs reflecting on the roofs of yellow taxis lined up bumper to bumper. Up Fifth Avenue during the Christmas season, past stores that held a fortune in clothing and trinkets, the merchandise lit up in tall windows, all sparkling as if set out by a jolly old elf. Protected from pedestrians and the winter nights by sheets of fortified glass fastened into grey stone walls as solid and sturdy as the walls of banks and government buildings.

Past St. Patrick's Cathedral, richly adorned like a medieval castle and built on the backs of frightened serfs like the many who had followed priests of one sort or another since time began. Through Rockefeller Center, stopping to lean over the rail to view the skaters whirl around on the ice

beneath the tallest Christmas tree in New York.

Our eyes widened at the spectacle of a world both new to us and alluring. At that age our responsibility to make certain choices was largely hidden from us. We thought our duty no more than to walk hand in hand, and "to have and to hold" each other in our arms at the end of the evening,

Unable to afford much else in an expensive city, we continued to walk and talk. It was me who talked the most, usually about myself, my plans, my dreams, and probably a little about my disappointments and fears.

My, how I could talk. And about so little, if measured by any sensible metric. I had no more than 5 or 6 interests in my young life. Most would have been about sex, leaving only one or two for polite conversation.

Never once did the girl turn my way and say she was tired of listening to me. I would tire of hearing myself before she did. I suppose she guessed that.

Almost two years later we sat on her mother's front porch in the evening and listened to the breeze rustle the lilacs. The sound of a late summer thunder storm came rolling toward us over the flat farmland that stretched out twenty miles between us and the St. Lawrence River. A week before our wedding day, we were full of plans and little disputes as we began to blend our lives together with early small steps. We disagreed over whether we wanted a drip coffee maker or a percolator. Certainly that was an important decision for a married couple. We were so naïve. If the angels hadn't been busy forming a lifetime of plans to protect us, I'm sure they would have been laughing.

As young as we were, we had already built a few memories. As the thunder came near we spoke of our walking about in New York City two years before. She told me she hadn't always listened to my tales as we walked, not exactly.

“What were you listening to, if you weren’t following my story about having my car fixed?”

“To your heart,” she said. “I wanted to know what kind of heart you had.”

“That soon?” I wondered. “We had only just met.”

“But I wanted to marry you.”

“Really? When did you decide on that?”

“The night you came to my apartment to offer me a ride upstate on weekends.”

“I was just trying to be helpful,” I said. “And I liked you. I remembered meeting you once before at that bar in Utica.”

“I remember that night,” she said. “You ignored me.”

“That meant I liked you. I was tongue tied, afraid of saying the wrong thing.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered,” she said.

“What did you learn about my heart while I was telling you all about my old car that was always broken? I never had the money to have it fixed.”

“That you were passionate about what interested you, but often got in over your head.”

“And you still wanted to marry me?”

“Even more. Because you worried about things. I knew you were responsible.”

At age twenty-two, I’d never thought about being responsible for someone else. I would have been worried whether I was handsome enough, smart enough, rich enough or astute enough to win the love of a woman.

Turns out I probably wasn’t any of those. So it was my good fortune that none of them mattered. I needed to be what someone wanted. Lucky for me, someone wanted me and I wanted her. God’s greatest gifts to me have always come without my asking.

But gifts can often have a price. Not a tit-for-tat “you owe me” price, but rather the kind that brings more responsibility. My wife, family, career have all been gifts that brought more obligations.

As a young man I thought being responsible for the woman I loved meant protecting her. After a few years I began to realize I was also responsible for my part in nurturing her. We weren’t often conscious of the process, but each of us would learn to grow up over the coming half century together, and we needed each other’s help in doing so. Condemnation of the other would never build anything, only tear it down, even when tossed at the other with a sly humor.

Neither of us began our marriage with what it took to stay married for fifty years. No one does. We had to carve that miracle out of the raw life given us. And feed it to each other, as we did the wedding cake on a beautiful Saturday afternoon in the fall of 1965. I don’t know the origin of the ceremony where the bride and groom feed each other cake, but today when I’m at a wedding reception I see it as a symbol of the two feeding the lessons of life to each other. It’s an awkward sight, but they do it lovingly and slowly, helping each other to manage the task.

We met life as it uniquely presented itself to us. The problems and frights, the successes and the failures, the joyous and sad times, “in sickness and in health.” And as each chapter flew by, I came to realize how it worked. First, I was responsible for myself. For my behavior. I could blame nothing on anyone else. And second, while my wife was responsible for her own life, I had promised to help her when I vowed I’d be with her “from this day forward.”

We never had any formal rules or expectations of each other. We felt our way in the dark and did what was comfortable. A relationship really shouldn’t need a lawyer and it isn’t balanced by each doing half of everything that needs to be done.

My wife has never done half the lawn mowing and she hasn’t taken out half of the garbage. She has done none of it.

A balanced relationship has each doing what the person feels is theirs to do in a

unique arrangement that works for them. How that comes about only they will know.

With the children my wife tended more toward matters of the heart while I tended to the practical. We had our roles. Some no doubt came from our families through our experience watching parents as we grew up. Many of the practices we took and many we left came from watching them and choosing what worked for us.

As young parents we thought we knew everything. After all, we read lots of books. We really didn't know much at all, but I suppose our arrogance allowed us to forge new paths and our ignorance guaranteed our self-satisfaction. I assume our parents did the same. Perhaps the delusion of self-sufficiency is evolutionary and helps parents acclimate to a changing social environment.

I'm not sure I knew it then, since we took on our roles as parents naturally, but today I realize that parenting is work. And some men and women are not ready to put in the effort. Looking back on it, I remember times when I had to do things or not do things when I didn't want to.

Like any other spouse or parent I sometimes fled my responsibility. The impromptu business trip was a favorite. So was the sudden desire to be with family members who were in any case getting along quite nicely without my presence most of the time.

As my children struggled through their teen years, my answer to the temporary chaos at home was to build another house in the back yard for myself. A tiny shed, my retreat was no larger than Thoreau's shack on Walden Pond, I built it of rough cut lumber out behind our home, in front of a field that backed up to woods of hemlock and oak, I didn't sleep there or take meals in the little structure. In fact, I spent less time there than I had planned, usually escaping to it only for an hour or two each time to tie trout flies. The interior was furnished with old camping

equipment, a toboggan and a camp stove, all in "1950s Boy's Life," as a neighbor described it.

"It will be quite small," I said to my wife before I began construction. We stood back near the woods one violet summer evening and I showed her the plans, carefully folded so as not to reveal the full future extent of it.

"What's this folded over on the other side?" she asked.

"Oh, just a 'someday' plan for an attached kind of barn. To house the tractor and the garden stuff."

She unfolded the map and held it up to see. "It's larger than the little house," she observed.

"Just a garden shed for way in the future," I said.

She laughed. "You're not starting another family back here, are you?"

At that point, it would have been the farthest from my mind.

I wouldn't be the first husband to admit that from at least an emotional point of view, I took more than I gave in our marriage. But it was a surprise to me when I finally realized it.

I sat one afternoon in Woodstock with a wonderfully insightful woman who with me shared a shift on the telephone Hotline. "Any problem under the sun," was our agency's motto. During times when the phones were quiet and our volunteer chores were up to date, we drank coffee and spoke of one thing or another and sometimes of what might be bothering either of us.

My wife had recently started back to school, bent on a career that would fully utilize her talents and abilities. Her days and nights were consumed with classes, plus the time to drive to them fifty miles distant. I missed her.

"I feel abandoned," I said. "When I get home from work she's not there like she

always was. I have to make my own supper and take care of the dog ...”

“Poor baby,” was the woman’s reaction.

”And I don’t mean to complain, but the house is not as clean and picked up as it always was.”

“She probably doesn’t have the time,” the woman said.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“So tell me one thing that disappoints you about how she’s not keeping house,” said my shift mate.

“OK,” I replied. “the wash not being done as often.”

“How much does that bother you?” she asked.

“Oh, not much. Not really.”

“But it’s the first thing that came to your mind.”

”OK, yes, it bothers me.”

“The wash needing to be done bothers you.”

“Yes, it bothers me,” I said.

She looked at me and sighed.

“So then why don’t *you* do the wash?”

I stared over her shoulder out the window at the trees on the street. I continued to stare fixedly at them. She waved a hand in front of my face as I sat opposite her, dumbfounded.

“Why don’t I do the wash?” I repeated, aloud to myself. I had never even thought of that as a solution. And I could do the dishes and even vacuum the rugs.

“Why the hell has that never occurred to me?” I said.

“Aha,” she said, “the value of launching a problem on the waters of conversation.”

I should have realized my responsibility much earlier, but I was too used to being cared for.

In September of this year (2015) the girl who walked with me all over New York City and I will celebrate our fiftieth wedding anniversary. I cannot tell you where the time has gone.

I am still responsible for her, although lately I find myself having to transfer some of my burdens to her shoulders since I am evidently aging faster than her. She has taken on a few of my chores. She remembers facts I now easily forget. I bring her with me to the doctor’s office and often introduce her jokingly as “my memory.”

Shuffling chores to one another to fit our lessening capabilities after a half century of marriage reminds me of standing up in a row boat and changing seats. It doesn’t feel very good. My arms reach out to maintain my balance. But there’s nothing to grab on to except each other.

As time goes on we will together need to hand more and more chores over to outsiders. That will be tough. But we can draw together as close as possible in the center of the boat. Eventually our only responsibility will be to hold each other, to love one another. Just like in the beginning when we first met and walked everywhere hand in hand. In our hearts, we’ll do it again.

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