

FROM WHERE I STAND (on Freedom, Rights and Responsibilities)

(This article comes from a U.S. writer. Its early part focussed on the situation there. Following that, it continues as below.)

We have a vocabulary problem. A serious one.

We strive to tell "freedom" from "licence," or "rights" from "responsibilities," or "laws" from "the common good." Let's be clear about our freedom, our rights, our laws and our responsibility to the common good.

First, we learn there that only some rights are unalienable — meaning cannot under any circumstances be taken away because they are part of being human, part of simply being born. Often called natural rights, they include, among other things, the right:

- To act in self-defense;
- To own private property;
- To work and enjoy the fruits of one's labor;
- To move freely within the country or to another country;
- To worship or refrain from worshipping within a freely-chosen religion;
- To be secure in one's home;
- To think freely.

The notion of unalienable rights originated in Athens, in the third century B.C. It was sealed by the Enlightenment in its 17th-century response to the fact that only the monarchy enjoyed personal freedom.

Second, to be "free" means to be able to do the do-able without being subject to undue or unjust constraints or enslavement. It does not mean that any of us have a licence to trample on the rights of others, though we are still struggling to grasp that, too.

Third, both personal and corporate rights come with the responsibility to maintain them for the self and for others.

There is, in other words, no such thing as the freedom to pollute, or the freedom to deforest, etc. because that would create conditions that violate other people's liberty not to be exposed to pollution.

"The right of the individual to freedom and self-realization" is an honorable one, a life-giving impetus to new ideas, new ways to be alive and new ways to develop both people and property. But it does not mean that individuals can refuse to strap babies into car seats once the commonwealth has determined the need to provide special protection for babies in cars built for adults. Red lights have saved the lives of a good many of people, including the lives of those who don't want to stop at them.

Speed limits make the roads safe for all of us — and make clear at the same time that individual acts that harm others are themselves illegal.

Drugs that are dangerous or addictive are controlled by the state. To use them or sell them carries the threat of jail time for those who think that they're in a "free" country and have the "right" to do whatever they please. Common good or no common good.

"The common good" is the antidote to toxic individualism.

Clearly, 'the land of the free and the home of the self-centered' has a lot to learn from the people of all ages and all countries who manage to wear masks, avoid pool parties and understand that the fines that go with activities like those are in recognition of everybody else's rights.

There is also the ongoing echo of a Scripture in us that we've apparently forgotten and maybe ought to read again. "And then the Lord asked Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' He answered, 'I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?' "
From where I stand, that question is being asked of all of us, and the answer is just as clear now as it was then.

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