
Victim & Responsible Attitudes

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Part of our work at Aurora Now includes a consulting charter with ARC Worldwide, a Denver-based firm which delivers corporate and personal training, coaching and seminars. ARC stands for Awareness, Responsibility and Communication, and the products and programs of ARC empower people to look at their life and their world in a new way, letting go of limiting attitudes and fixed beliefs. My work with ARC's core leadership team supports our ongoing research and programs at Aurora Now.

Recently, I've had the enjoyable task (hardly a "task"!) of reviewing Robert White and Dennis Becker's recorded script for the soon-to-be-released Extraordinary Living home study program being produced by Nightingale-Conant.

Parts of the script mirror Robert's book, "Living an Extraordinary Life," and the topics addressed by Dennis at ARC Worldwide seminars. One of those topics is choosing between an attitude of being a victim or being responsible; to look at things through a "blame frame" or an "outcome frame." Robert uses a couple of powerful examples in his book and on this tape. As I was reading it again, I couldn't help but think of when "take responsibility" really hit me, personally... and I felt it might be valuable to others if I shared that story.

In 1995, my husband Pat and I met W Mitchell for the first time. It was at one of Windstar's Choices symposia at a pre-event reception. Over the next week in Aspen, we became instant friends and spent occasional weekends and evenings with Mitchell over the next years whenever we happened to be in the same city. We catch up by phone every few months or so.

For those of you who don't know who Mitchell is, well, he's kind of a wild and crazy guy. (But those are stories for another day!) He's also one of the most sought-after keynote speakers and authors around the world. In two separate accidents he was burned over 65% of his body, then

four years later paralyzed from the waist down when his Cessna crashed in Crested Butte, CO.

We had only heard him speak once—an abbreviated version of his regular keynote delivered at Windstar. About four years ago, we all happened to be in Los Angeles at the same time and attended his keynote at a Pasadena hotel. He rolled his wheelchair onto the stage and started telling his story, which as you might imagine, is quite compelling.

He talked about the victim/responsible mind frame. Now here's a man who literally 'had it all'—youth, good looks, health, a good job and a beautiful girlfriend. First his face and fingers were literally burned off when a laundry truck ran into the side of his motorcycle. Then, just as he was getting his life together, he lost the use of his legs in the plane accident. He rolled around the stage, telling five hundred or so in attendance, "I *have to* take responsibility for my life. These accidents happened to *me*, not someone else, and if I put the responsibility on someone else and blame them or circumstances, then I *give up* my ability to take charge of my life. I'm just not interested in letting someone else be in charge of my life, so I have to take responsibility for it."

In one of life's little ironies, shortly after moving to Tucson three years ago, we had an environmental problem with the home we were leasing which caused a severe neurological reaction, affecting my husband and two sons, and myself. I had the worst reaction and spent most of the next two years using a wheelchair if I had to transport myself more than 10-20 feet. During one of our visits with Mitchell at his Santa Barbara home—the first time we had gotten together since I'd become "incapacitated"—I remember wondering what kind of 'Mitchell-isms' we'd be hearing over dinner.

He never said a word about our matching wheels (although I *swear* he was trying to race me down the Santa Barbara sidewalks). He was more

interested in ‘car talk’ with my teenage sons. I had never really felt like a victim even though I was in a wheelchair. I guess a part of me always figured, at least I can get 20 feet on my legs if I have to. But that’s not the point.

The point is, I remember sitting in a Santa Barbara restaurant later that evening, listening to Mitchell carry on with the boys and thinking how grateful I was for his friendship, the *real* kind of friendship where he just *knew* I wasn’t feeling like a ‘victim’ so he didn’t have to say anything. Probably one of the reasons I never really found myself in the “blame frame” from the neurotoxin was hearing Mitchell’s perspective earlier in L.A. Of course, Mitchell had heard the same message about taking responsibility long before his first accident as well.

Author Maya Angelou wrote, “When you know better, you do better.” I was planning to write those words, but she beat me to it!

Those words perfectly communicate the real power of ARC seminars and the purpose of our research at Aurora Now. When we know better, we do better. Something pops up in our consciousness at the point of decision that says, “how do I want to choose here? What are my options?” When we know better... we *choose* better. I was thinking as I read Robert’s tape script how fortunate I’ve been to get so much of this wisdom from my husband, friends, colleagues and experience and what a difference it really has made in my life. While I was wheelchair bound, I drove around the country with my family (Ok, they drove me around) giving workshops and research presentations, finished my graduate degree while publishing research for my foundation, and called Robert to ask how I could help with his new U.S. company.

People often commented that my disability didn’t seem to slow me down. I assured them it sped me up, especially when going down hills. I can’t imagine what my choices would have been had I not known better. Would I have done the ‘expected’ lamenting and wallowing and blaming about my legs? Without Mitchell’s words in my memory banks, would I have chosen a victim attitude? I don’t know. Maybe. (I can do victim real good when it comes to washing dishes, so I know I’m capable of it!).

I’ve been participating in a 5-week certificate program in Transformational Leadership called “Women of Impact.” Having spent all of my adult professional career as a business owner and executive, many of the “women’s issues” I’ve heard sound foreign and certainly are outside my realm of experience. I commented to another woman business owner today that at first, I thought, “wow, I’ve been really lucky in my career never to encounter those kinds of dis-empowering, old-school-male-dominated work environments.” Then I thought again, that luck had little to do with it. I did take one traditional, corporate upper-management position with an Internet company several years ago. I lasted less than a year before leaving. I never experienced a “glass ceiling” because I’ve chosen quite clearly to not be in that sort of environment.

The women we’ve heard at the University of Arizona classroom the past couple weeks made that same choice away from ‘victim’ (“doormat” was the word used) to responsibility. They faced a choice of a career of victimhood or a career of empowerment. They took a stand for their integrity and chose “responsible.” It has little to do with the “women’s issues” and everything to do with awareness and conscious choice about personal empowerment. It’s a leadership quality, not a female quality. These women let go of the ‘blame frame’ of the “glass ceiling effect” and take personal responsibility for their careers. Their stories have been inspiring, to say the least.

“When you know better, you do better.” Awareness empowers responsibility. Responsibility empowers communication. Communication empowers extraordinary results. Wow. Amazing how that works, isn’t it?

(Sherryl worked with ARC Worldwide for 2 years from 2000-2002 during their U.S. launch as a strategic consultant, leadership coach and communications and technology specialist.)

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Victim & Responsible Attitudes: Part 2: *Response-able*

Last week I sent an article that spoke of the choice between a ‘victim’ and ‘responsible’ attitudes. A few readers wrote back with comments I’d like to address this week. Laura Camp from the Center for Partnership Studies wrote, “We probably agree that the victim role can be disempowering as well as not fun to be around, while making the best of your situation without complaining is more empowering and usually inspires approval from others. I am concerned, though, (and you did not say this, but I think it’s floating around out there a lot) with the thought that ‘there are no victims, only volunteers.’” Dr. Ely Dorsey writes, “Whether we are oppressor or the oppressed we have to account for our actions. We have to fight to break the glass ceiling. Sometimes the way to understand the struggle is to live through the victimization. It is not a detached intellectual exercise.”

I couldn’t agree more with both of them. Are there genuine ‘victims’ of oppression? Of course there are. That is not to say that victims always feel disempowered. It is those feelings I sought to address in my first article. Victor Frankl, author of “Man’s Search for Meaning” and a holocaust survivor, wrote,

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

I imagine very few could look back on their lives and not recall a circumstance where they were legitimately victimized or oppressed. And yes, the glass ceiling does still exist in corporate America. The statistics are pretty sad: In the past 30 years, women have “improved” from making around 60 cents per dollar for the same work as their male counterparts to making around 72 cents per dollar for the same work—only about a 10 cent improvement. Dr. Dorsey is correct in calling for accountability, for the courage and empowerment to re-

spond to such oppression. That is exactly the difference between attitudes. The ability to respond: Response-ability.

True response-ability comes from deep inside, from a place of courage and feelings of empowerment. The real danger, as I see it, is to “swing” one’s understanding of responsibility away from those who are legitimately oppressed or victimized, however. Taking responsibility for the victimization or oppression of others, without directly empowering them to also respond, perpetuates their lack of control or empowerment of their own lives and futures. Notice I say, “without directly empowering them to **also** respond.”

Even our friend Mitchell, the most stubbornly independent, accountable and respons-able man we know, speaks often about the power of partnership, and the necessity of having the support of others. For seven years, my email signature has carried the quote by R. Buckminster Fuller, “I became convinced we are here for each other.” We are not in this thing called ‘life’ alone, nor should we seek to cure all of society’s failings on behalf of others. There is an common adage, ‘Give a man a fish, and he’ll eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and you’ve fed him for life.’ Again, the small difference in attitude can have a huge difference in behavior, choices and the outcome of any circumstance.

In speaking of partnership, author Riane Eisler suggests that as we re-define “power” from a perspective of “power over” to a perspective of “power to,” we create the mindset of empowerment within ourselves and partnership with others.

I’m often criticized (probably rightfully) for being overly intellectual, especially in my writing. And yet it is specifically the heart to which I speak here. In my opinion, there is no greater gift we can give to ourselves or others than a feeling of empowerment. And this feeling or attitude has little to do with reason, and everything to do with confidence, courage, and self-esteem. So much is spoken these days of “giving up ego” that often the message is confused with giving up healthy self-esteem. Yet humility and inner strength are the most inspiring and powerful combination of qualities I can think of. They are qualities that empower support and partnership to really create cultures and societies where oppression and victimization lose their grip.