

Personal Responsibility

By Ralph Colby

We really have only one major choice in life. Everything else follows, or falls apart, from that. That choice is between freedom and authority, between being self-directed or other-directed. The most basic and essential kind of freedom is the freedom of the individual. Individual freedom has been succinctly described by Salvador de Madariaga y Rojo: "He is free who knows how to keep in his own hands the power to decide at each step, the course of his life".

We each have within us the capacity to be free, to keep the power to decide at each step, the course of our lives. In other words, we each have the power to become autonomous, self-governed, independent (in the true sense of the word) individuals. If we choose to be free, we will take control of our lives at each step. We will realize and accept that we are totally responsible for our own lives, with all its decisions and actions, both of omission and commission. Whenever we are confronted with a decision we will either agree or disagree.

Whichever reaction we choose, we must accept the consequences of that choice. We must also accept full responsibility for our actions and their consequences. In doing so we will be utilizing our power to be and become the best person we can be. If, on the other hand, we choose to place ourselves at the mercy of someone or something else's authority, we will lose control of our lives at each step. The reverse of being free is being under authority, ie, giving our power to decide to someone or something else. Authority, in the words of Erich Fromm, 'refers to an interpersonal relation in which one person looks upon another as somebody superior to him. "But Fromm goes on to explain that aside from external authority, such as a person or an institution, there is internal authority, such as duty, conscience or superego. Internal authority could be "something" within us, a concept, an illusion, which runs contrary to what we know is best for us in view of our values and needs. Even then, our internal authority has its roots in our submission to other people's influence over our lives.

When we allow an authority to direct our lives, we become other-directed. When we are other-directed we often sacrifice our own will in order to fulfil the will of another. When we do this, we are either rebelling or complying. These two possible responses, rebellion and compliance, both grow out of others. If we comply with authority's will, we will most likely resent sacrificing our own will. And if we rebel against the authority, our action will be one of resistance. Resistance and resentment, both negative responses, often lead to revenge. And vengeful deeds really have two casualties: the victim and the avenger. Nothing is gained by anyone through revenge, neither good feelings nor productive relationships. Without good feelings and productive relationships we tend to lose confidence in our capacity to act, in our power to determine the course of our own lives.

Our life patterns are fairly easily charted if we keep this choice between freedom and authority in mind. If we are free, autonomous, self-directed individuals, our actions follow one pattern. If we are other-directed individuals, under authority, our actions follow another pattern. These patterns reveal feelings and attitudes rather than behavior. It's often a simple difference between having good feelings (about ourselves and others) and having bad feelings. When we act out of a sense of autonomy, with its resulting good feelings, we are generally open to learning, to changing, to growing. However, when we act out of a sense of authority, when we *allow* others to direct our lives, with the resulting bad feelings, we are more resistant to growth and change. In order to change we must be willing to exchange resentment and resistance for acceptance and responsibility.

What all this boils down to is the willingness to take responsibility for our own lives. Things happen to us because we either cause or allow them to happen. Freedom, then, brings positive feelings and behavior, but it also means that we have no place to hide, no one to blame and no excuses. Taking responsibility for ourselves is the price we pay for freedom.