



Social Conscience & Civil Responsibility

By CHARLES D. HAYES

Mention civil disobedience, and most people think of Martin Luther King Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi. But, a hundred years before their time, Henry David Thoreau was its champion. Thoreau was very nearly an anarchist, and his contempt for government has caused him to be greatly misunderstood.

In his essay "Civil Disobedience", published in 1849, Thoreau argues that the government which governs best is the one that "governs not at all." People who misunderstand his work stop there, failing to recognize that what he advocated was "better government." His notion of better government required superior constituents.

King and Gandhi knew exactly what he meant. In a country made up of citizens like Thoreau, there would be no need for much government at all. And, in such a society, institutions like slavery would be impossible.

Thoreau's essay was a clarion call for development of a social conscience by each and every member of society, not just by victims of oppression and injustice. He asks, "Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man of conscience, then?...The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right."

Beyond the oppressors themselves, Thoreau, also held accountable those who

benefited from the oppression, regardless of whether they had anything to do with creating the injustice.

Thoreau's philosophy was about accepting responsibility. More than for the evils inherent in government, he held contempt for the lack of public awareness and felt responsibility among the free citizens of his time. Little has changed.

Turn your television to the financial news and you will hear talk of leveraged multiples, short selling, buyouts, and arbitrage with jargon so complex as to defy comprehension. And yet, the majority of people who strain to understand these convoluted concepts cannot conceive that people who enjoy the advantage of this system, which is unjust by design, bear any responsibility for setting it right. Economic justice requires thinking about fairness with as much intellectual rigor and enthusiasm as we apply to Wall Street investments.

Thoreau allowed that each of us might pursue legitimate interests without taking up the banner of a particular injustice. At the very least, however, we have a duty to stop benefitting from the disadvantage of others. We must not, as a result of our advantage, sit "upon another's shoulders."

Simply put this holds each of us responsible for the society we live in today. It matters not a whit to Thoreau that you and I weren't a party to establishing the institutions which continue to perpetuate injustices through discrimination

and exclusion. That we benefit from them today, in ignorance of our own continued complicity, is not an excuse.

King put it this way: "Many people fear nothing more terribly than to take a position which stands out sharply and clearly from the prevailing opinion. The tendency of most is to adopt a view that is so ambiguous that it will include everything and so popular that it will include everybody."

He and Gandhi understood the power of injustice brought to light. They knew that non-violent protest especially when those who protest are mistreated - will bring social conscience to bear on anyone who harbors any semblance of honesty.

More than a century has passed since Thoreau published "Civil Disobedience," yet millions of Americans remain unmoved to figure out for themselves what is just and unjust. The sophomoric sense of citizenship embraced by too many for too long is a freedom from - a poverty-stricken sense of freedom which focuses on what each of us has a right to escape at the expense of responsibility we should own.

People who deny their culpability for slavery because they were not yet born when it was practiced, find it hard to comprehend that they, as citizens are responsible for what is today. If injustices are still present as a result of the institution of slavery, then each of us the duty to discover the cause, the effect, and the remedy.

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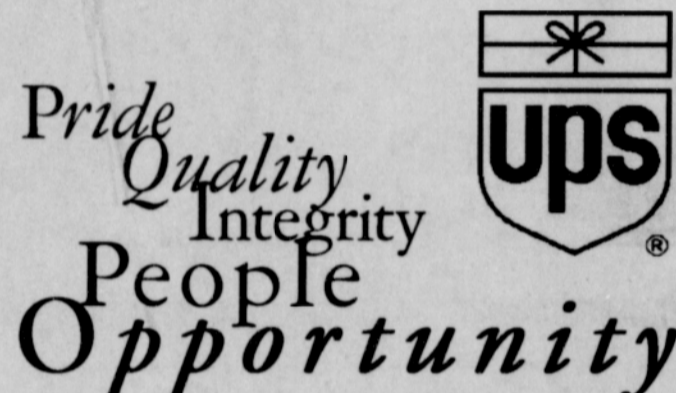
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