

A Perspective....
Rev. Suzanne Paul

I have been thinking a great deal about “accountability” of late. It seems that being accountable for one’s behavior has simply gone the way of the buggy whip. No one, it appears, is responsible for their actions. I find this such a curiosity. It makes me think that we human beings lost our “free will” somewhere and haven’t been able to find it. Years ago the comedian, Skip Wilson, said it best. Any infraction of good behavior could be excused by uttering “the devil made me do it” - and then all would be forgiven. Ah, were it only that easy.

Webster’s Dictionary defines “accountable” as “to answer concerning one’s conduct, to be responsible, answerable.” Apparently many people do “answer concerning their conduct” – they just don’t have any problem lying about it. Their accountability ends when it might shed an unfavorable light on their misdeed. The lack of accountability permeates all walks of life. We cannot pick up a newspaper or watch CNN and not see daily evidence that accountability is more than passé, it’s downright archaic.

After all, who in their right mind would own up to such grievous offenses as dog fighting, taking steroids, cheating on one’s spouse, lying under oath or any number of other bad behaviors? The answer is: absolutely, at the public’s expense, no one. And this avoidance of accountability starts very early. The infractions that I mentioned were adult misdeeds – but my guess is that the culture of unaccountability started in youth. The first time we got caught doing something less than appropriate, how were we taught to respond? That is what makes the difference. I was fortunate to have learned that very valuable lesson when still a teenager.

When just sixteen, a group of my girlfriends and I decided that it would be fun to steal one of those orange construction cones. One Friday evening, we piled into the family car, and went for a joy ride. While out cruising around we drove past a road construction site and spotted the cones. “Wouldn’t it be hilarious to take one home,” I said. So we managed to squeeze that cone in the backseat of my parent’s 1954 Chevrolet. The next morning my father found the cone sitting in our basement. He asked me during breakfast where the cone had come from. I told him that my girlfriends and I had taken it. I remember that I laughed a little in telling him the story. He looked at me and said “is it your idea of a good time to steal things?” I was so busted. “No,” I replied. “Well that’s good,” said my father, “then you will have no trouble putting that cone back in the car and returning it to the spot where you found it.” My first grown-up lesson in accountability.

It was not, alas, my one and only transgression. It was a misdemeanor compared to a few offenses committed as an adult. But I always knew that my behavior would have consequences and that I would be held accountable. My father taught me about honesty and integrity – and that lesson has served me well throughout my life. We humans all mess up – but when we do, we need to say we’re sorry and make restitution. Blaming someone else is just not acceptable – not ever.