

ENLARGED RESPONSIBILITY

Earlier this year, on a trip to Hong Kong, some of my flights were on an airline based in the United States and some on an airline based in Asia.

On one leg of the journey, aboard a North American carrier, a flight attendant delivered a meal that included a chicken entrée. When I touched the tray, it felt cold. When I tasted the food, it was unheated. So I called the flight attendant and reported it. “Yes,” she said, “our ovens are not working and we have no way to fix them during the flight.” Apparently, she was responsible only for bringing trays to passengers. She felt no accountability for what was on the tray. The food may have been inedible. But her duty was to deliver it. By limiting her role to something very small, she had fulfilled her responsibility.

On another leg of the journey, aboard an Asian carrier, our flight was delayed by a mechanical problem. When the aircraft was eventually ready for departure, seven or eight uniformed employees of the airline stood in front of the gate and bowed to the passengers.

Perhaps the bow was just a cultural custom. But I took it as collective acceptance of responsibility for the delay. The agent whose job was to wave a boarding pass under a scanner had no direct role in mechanically repairing the plane. But she accepted responsibility for the whole company’s service to its customers.

Some people, by training or temperament, enlarge their sense of accountability for public matters. Others, as a friend put it, seem determined to “ensmall” their sense of responsibility.

It is odd to shrink our obligations while we are expanding everything else. We have large amounts of information available. We manage a large number of tasks simultaneously. We communicate with large circles of friends by clicking a mouse or tapping a button on a mobile phone.

So why is it, when we are enlarging everything else, that we are ensmalling our moral obligations? That is what South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford did, when he framed his apology by “ensmalling” everything to his own feelings. He discounted his larger responsibilities to the marriage for which he had made a pledge, to the children whom he had helped bring into the world, and to the system of government for which he had taken an oath. He asked the world to let him ensmall his conduct to whatever he happened to be feeling at any particular time.

We could view his behavior as merely a matter of one adulterous man mistreating his family and misleading his state. But that would ensmall what is a much larger social problem. Something tragic has happened in our society when the prevailing attitude seems to be “I have my health care coverage, but I am not accountable for the lack of yours.” Or, “I am happy with the education my children are receiving, but I am not responsible for the inadequacies of yours.”

We need to learn the value of taking a collective bow, accepting responsibility for our social failures, and embracing the challenge to fix them.

Nobody should have to eat what is inedible. Nobody should have to suffer an illness without health care. And nobody in a decent society should be allowed to ensmall his or her responsibilities to fit an individual’s feelings.

Enlarging our moral perspective could change that.

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