

## RESPONSE-ABILITY

### **Background and Context**

There is no personal power (no response-ABILITY) when we blame outside forces—the “system”—for the condition of the world. Why? Because when we blame: 1) we lose our ability to steer the situation in another direction, 2) we lose our ability to learn from the situation, and 3) we lose our ability to put ourselves in good relationship with the “other.” So in the blame game (the game most of us have been conditioned to play) we have very little power to act constructively because we forfeit our response-**ability**.

There is another way; we can ‘reframe’ and take full responsibility for what has happened. In this scenario, we let go of our conditioned need to be ‘right’—our conditioned tendency to see ourselves as victims of circumstance. In other words we break our pattern! Why? Because we recognize that no matter what the issue may be, we did, in some sense, create it, and for this reason, we also have the power to create a new result! This new stance, stressing our individual ability to respond, acknowledges that we can’t do anything about someone else’s actions, but we do have the power to act—we have response-**ability**—within the realm of our own lives.

This may be a hard message for some to receive because, as a nation, we have become addicted to blaming someone or something else for every and all misfortune. Yet, it is this very blaming that leaves so many of us powerless to act, especially when it comes to ‘fixing’ all the environmental problems that now confront us. Imagine the world we would live in if all of us stopped pointing the finger at villains ‘over there’ and started accepting our own personal part in the deterioration of Earth.

### **Check In**

Name one "place" or situation where you feel powerless in your life.

### **Activity One: I Am So Sick and Tired Of ...**

Inspired by Joanna Macy, Coming Back to Life, 1998

If you pay attention to the news, chances are you are bombarded with news reports focusing on ecological problems: forest decline, soil loss, environmental cancers, climate destabilization.... the dreary list goes on.... and on.... Call to mind all these depressing facts and take the next five minutes to do a ‘free write’ starting with:

**I am soooo sick and tired of hearing about.....**\_\_\_\_\_

After you have all performed this 'free-write,' face your neighbor and complete the following sentence: “I’ll tell you who is really to blame for ... You want to know... Well... it’s:

\_\_\_\_\_And rant away, as you see fit (or don't). Explore your avenues of blame.

Now, having just ranted, describe how you **feel**?

Are you ready to take a specific action to help 'fix' the problem? Yes? No? Why? How?

### **Activity Two: Connecting the Dots**

1. Think about all the environmental problems you have read about and heard in the news and in this course. Take a minute on this.

2. Someone—a volunteer or a facilitator—go to the board and write these problems down as we all call them out. Beside each problem, draw a DOT.

3. Next, as you see them, come up and draw connections between certain issues/problems AND explain to us, as well as you can, the nature of the connection that you see. NOTE: Take your time with this, really pushing to locate more and more connections between the 'dots.' Don't be surprised if some 'dots' have more than 10 lines connecting them with other issues. Some issues are simply more deeply embedded in the whole of the environmental crisis.

4. Next, once we have a big web of interlinked (interrelated) problems (DOTS), look at all the dots and identify the one that is of most concern to YOU—the one that you most resonate with or that pulls most at your heart. For some this might be climate destabilization, for others it might be the extinction of species, for others it might be cancers caused by environmental pollution. It does not matter. Find the one that matters most to you. Once everyone has identified their principle concern, go up to the board, one by one, and circle that dot. Before you leave the board, explain to us why you are touched by this particular issue. Do you have a story to share?

5. Go up to the board and place your initials next to your area of action (the dot that you will affect). When everyone is done, contemplate the board. The point: All these dots ARE CONNECTED; when you act on your one dot, you WILL affect, in some measure, all the other dots. There is power in that!

6. Finally, brainstorm, on your own, 2-3 things you could literally DO within the next week to lessen, if only a little, the problem that you have identified. Be as CONCRETE as possible. Once you have your own ideas, collect into a group with those who circled the same problem as you, and discuss possibilities with them.

7. After you have identified three possible actions, choose ONE thing that you might consider committing to doing in the next week. If you are resistant to actually committing to taking some kind of step, that's fine. Do this instead: pay attention to the beliefs underlying your reluctance to take even a small step or action. In being asked to take one action, you are being asked to question an entrenched belief—namely the belief that many people now seem to hold—that there is nothing an individual can do or SHOULD DO to address the environmental problems now plaguing Earth. Is this true? Consider the ways in which holding this disempowering beliefs serves you?

### **Activity Three: The Ladder of Powerful Speaking**

Abridged from: *Falling Awake*, Dave Ellis (<http://www.fallingawake.com/book/fa/110.pdf>)

"The Ladder of Powerful Speaking" is a tool to climb out of the depths of victimhood to the heights of personal agency and power. As you have seen many times by now, we "sentence" ourselves for better or worse with our WORDS. This Ladder has six rungs of increasing agency, running from bottom to top: obligation, possibility, preference, passion, plan, and pledge/promise.

- 1. Obligation:** *I should, I have to, I must, someone better, they made me, I ought to.* "People who speak this way often perceive themselves as victims at the mercy of their circumstances."
- 2. Possibility:** *I might, I'll consider, I could, maybe I will, I hope.* "When you speak at this level, you create an opening for new goals and new results in your life."
- 3. Preference:** *I prefer to, I want to.* "Often it makes sense to move from declaring a goal as possible to declaring a clear preference for doing it."
- 4. Passion:** *I'd love to, I'm excited about, I can't wait to.* "When you are more passionate about a goal, you're more likely to take action to achieve it."
- 5. Plan:** *I plan to.* "A plan, especially if it is written down, helps ensure that you'll back up your passions with action. A plan gives purpose and direction to your passions."
- 6. Pledge/Promise:** *I will, I do, I pledge, I give you my word.* "Promises are plans backed by iron-clad commitment. When it comes to promising, most of us do not even come close to our potentials. We are capable of far more than we've ever imagined. With promises we can free ourselves of the artificial barriers we've used to limit our participation in the world. One path to a rich, rewarding life is to make promises that stretch us to meet our potentials."

Dave Ellis uses the language of obligation in marriage to exhibit the rungs of this ladder: "Well, I know I really should be faithful' is not the language of romantic commitment. Neither is 'I ought to be faithful,' 'I might be faithful,' 'I'd like to be faithful,' or even 'I really want to be faithful.' None of that language brings much confidence in a marriage vow. Marriage is about promise and commitment: 'I will be faithful.'"

Now, do it yourself. You are a German in Germany. It is World War II. A young boy comes to your door and begs, "Please Protect Me!" You understand his situation, yet you feel victimized by the weight of his request. What can you do? The SS and Gestapo are so powerful and violent ... Climb the Ladder of Powerful Speaking and see how you feel about your situation as you move from rung to rung:

- I know I really should protect you ...
- I could protect you ...
- I want to protect you ...
- I'd love to protect you ...
- I plan to protect you ...
- I promise to protect you ...

Why do "The Ladder of Powerful Speaking?" Because, again, as with blaming, it illustrates how we make ourselves small and how we forfeit our response-ABILITY—in this case by using speech that allows us to excuse ourselves from action.

**Check Out**

President Truman had a small wood and glass sign on his desk that read: "The Buck Stops Here." That is, when he came upon a situation, he **CHOSE** to deal with it; he didn't pass the buck of responsibility. Talk about the assumption of agency. The check out here is simple: Find something in your life that victimizes you or burdens you. When it is your turn to check out, simply think of this thing and say, "The Buck Stops Here." That's all.

## OUT-OF-CLASS FIELD STUDY: RESPONSE-ABILITY

### From Blame to Response-ABILITY:

Look around, with an eye for blame or responsibility. What do you see? On television. From your professors. In your fellow students, your roommates, your family. Watch strangers. Where does the buck stop? With whom does it keep going? Spend at least one day with these questions primed in your mind. Write "BUCK" on your hand if it helps to remind you what you're up to. After you have had the time to meditate on your experience, compose a short response piece (to be about 1 double-spaced page in length).

### The Exercise:

1-Take a situation in your life where you are **BLAMING** someone or something for a problem you are experiencing. Describe the situation with emphasis on how you are a victim and the other person or thing is to blame for your misfortune. Call this **Response Scenario 1**.

2-Now, take this very same situation and rather than pointing the blame away from you (as you just did), instead, take full response-ability for what has happened to you. **Call this Response Scenario 2**.

Here is an example that happened last night: *Suppose you go to Home Delivery to pick up the dinner you just called in. It's a ten-minute drive. You check in at the counter; they take your information and charge your credit card. They go into the back room, pick up your food, come out with it in a bag. You drive home only to hear your sister—who had been waiting, starving—say as she opens the bag, "I ordered Cheese Fries. Where is the cheese?" And you, too, soon see that you don't have your salad. You call them back, they say, "I'm sorry. Our hostess is new. We'll give you a five dollar coupon. You can come back for your other food now." Your sister says, "Ugh. The food will be cold. We should get a free meal. It's their fault. They owe us." It's tempting to think this way. But, instead, you say ... .. "I'm the one who didn't check the bag before driving home. My fault." No hostility, that simple. Imagine that YOU take full responsibility for your predicament! How could you do this? That's what I am asking here.*

3-Finally, reflect on your sense of personal power—i.e., **how powerful or powerless** you feel in **Scenario 1** (where you blame someone else or some set of circumstances for your misfortune) **compared to Scenario 2** (where you take full response-ability) for what has happened. **Consider specifically your inclination to act (or not) to change/improve the situation in Scenario 1 vs. Scenario 2.**

It is important to realize that this is not the transferal of the weight of victimhood to the weight of Atlas. You are not taking the whole world upon your shoulders. You are merely extricating yourself from the mud of an incapacitated mindset to a position and vantage of agency.

Please **compose a short response piece** to this experience.