

The Wisdom in the Mirror —The Power of Personal Responsibility

By Doug Kelley, CSL • February 2001
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**"If you could kick the man responsible for most of your troubles,
you wouldn't sit down for a week."**

—Owen Arnold

WHILE in Saint Louis, Missouri, for some training in the summer of 1999, I found something that has had a major impact on my thinking and perspective. I found it in a cubbyhole in my assigned workstation. I don't know where it came from, or who left it there, but I knew it needed a new owner, and I was only too happy to fill that position.

It was a specialty item, about the size of a business card; flat, magnetic on the back, and had a mirror finish on the front—you could see yourself in it. Printed on the mirror surface were the words:

"I am Looking at the Person Responsible for My Future."

Those words have reverberated through my mind many times since that day. And the interesting thing about it is not so much the words themselves—after all, they reflect a concept I am well aware of—but the profound way in which they were presented. The whole idea of looking at yourself in the mirror (as we do several times each day) and being reminded that it is we individually who bear responsibility for our own lives is intensely thought provoking.

I found these words and the manner in which they were presented so moving that I printed them out on paper and taped them to the bathroom mirrors in my house. That way my family and I are reminded of their power and truth everyday—even if it is only subconsciously.

Try it for yourself: Stand in front of a mirror, look yourself square in the eye, and say five or ten times out loud, "I am looking at the person responsible for my future." Powerful!

These words reflect a principle truth in our universe. But how unfortunate that many people never truly learn this precious truth. So often, we see someone blaming everything from God to their childhood for the problems they have. And while there may be a measure of truth in what they say, the "real truth" remains: each one of us is responsible for ourselves—no one else.

Only we control us. Try as we may, we can never control or take responsibility for someone else. The sooner we understand this concept—no, the sooner we *comprehend the complete meaning* of those words down to our very soul—the more meaningful and productive our lives will become.

WHAT ELSE CAN WE LEARN?

Is there anything else we can learn from these beautiful words of personal responsibility? Suppose we modify those words slightly. Think about this:

"I Am Looking at the Person Responsible for Where I am TODAY."

If you are like me, you may object when you first read these words. In my own experience, my most difficult adversities came as a result of someone else's drinking. How could I be responsible for where I am today if it was due to another's alcoholism—something I had no control over?

As I learned the lessons of the adversity and came to terms with my own codependency, I realized I was both right and wrong in my thinking. I was correct in the part about not being able to control another person or their addiction. However, it took me a long time to realize that I had played the roles of the Enabler, the Codependent, and the Victim—and I played these roles for years, and I was very, very good at it. Furthermore, my playing these roles (something I *could* control) contributed in no small measure to the pain and adversity I went through.

So the point is this: We alone play a much bigger role for where we are right now than we may like to think. In other words, life is much fairer than we give it credit for, because life returns to us exactly what we put into it. Just like the mirror—it gives us back exactly what it sees.

These are strong words, and it can be difficult to accept them. But don't take my word for it—explore this concept for yourself and see if it doesn't ring true.

Let me also qualify this entire concept of personal responsibility. There certainly are times and events in which we have no control, such as freak accidents, or acts of nature. I am not addressing those times or events. I am addressing the 99% or the rest of our lives that we can control.

ABOUT OUR PAST

How about another modification of those words?

“I Am Looking at the Person Responsible for My PAST.”

If we are responsible for our present and future, then it follows that we are also responsible for our past. But this is an area where we must be very careful, we must understand it in perspective. Why? Because we were not always adults. As children, we were not always responsible for our actions due to age and inexperience. There is also the deeply painful issue of childhood physical, emotional and sexual abuse. Many children emerge into adulthood carrying heavy burdens of guilt and shame because of events they truly could not control. So we must be balanced in our assessment of our past, especially when it comes to our childhood.

But here is the critical truth about our past: We have all made mistakes! Sure it would be nice to go back and change a thing or two, even many things, but we simply cannot. And would we really want to? Our mistakes, missteps, and blunders are the things that have made us who we are. My father always told me, "He who makes no mistakes doesn't do anything." As we go out and happen to life, mistakes are unavoidable, and this is perfectly acceptable, for it can be no other way.

We can't go back and change the past, but we *can* learn the lessons contained in our mistakes and then move forward. **By learning the lessons contained in our mistakes and moving forward, we take responsibility for our past!** In fact, this is the *primary way* we take responsibility for our past, because the past is the past and we cannot change it.

We must also accept responsibility for our past by accepting and learning from the *consequences* of our past mistakes. This could include making restitution, fulfilling an obligation, or providing care, to name a few.

A while back, I happened to be listening to talk show host Bruce Williams as I was driving one night. He was talking to a fellow who had gotten himself into debt by about \$10,000. The caller had a great attitude toward his debt—he wanted to get himself out of it because he had gotten himself into it. Bruce applauded the fellow and made an interesting comment, "When we stand in front of the mirror, we either see a little boy or a man." Bruce was calling attention to taking personal responsibility in our own life. If we want our lives to change, then we must stand tall in the mirror, that is, in our own internal opinion of ourselves, and make those changes. In this way, we see an adult—not a child—when we look in the mirror. By seeing ourselves as such, we act as adults—not children—in taking and accepting personal responsibility for our lives.

When we combine powerful words with powerful presentation, we are left with a life-changing concept: We alone are responsible for our future, our past (in perspective), and where we are today.

So the next time you are looking at the person in the mirror, repeat the words, "I am looking at the person responsible for my past, present and future." Accept responsibility for who you are; for where you are. Learn from the Wisdom in the Mirror.

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