

JOTTINGS

Morality... first and last a parental responsibility

Have seeds of lawlessness and moral corruption taken root in the garden of American society? And if so, from what weedy and neglected pastures of mankind have they blown? Or, is the picture of Americans as honest, upright, law-abiding citizens but an illusion? Have we always deluded ourselves about mankind's essential goodness, all the while harboring characteristics of self-gratification at the expense of our neighbors?

Since the colonies declared independence from English domination over 200 years ago, our society has depended upon law and order to function for the benefit of all its people. The Constitution and our Bill of Rights establish basic rules under which this nation conducts its affairs. Historically, while there have always been outlaws and criminals among us, as among all peoples, most of us have accepted the imposition of laws as necessary for everyone's welfare, and have attempted to conduct ourselves within the limits of those laws.

Protection of property rights and personal freedoms guaranteed us from our nation's inception have historically been possible only because people bowed to the idea that the common good takes precedence over any single individual's exercise of power. That "might" was not necessarily "right," that justice could be achieved only if everyone obeyed the law, that any other course could lead only to anarchy, were accepted precepts.

While most people still believe in law and order, a growing number appears to consider itself beyond or above the law. Americans who would bristle at being called criminals are nevertheless ignoring many regulations designed to protect

our collective safety.

Scofflaws are found at all levels, in all age groups, and at every turn across the nation. Despite anti-litter laws, taxpayers pay enormous sums for trash clean-up in communities large and small. Bikers ride two-wheelers against traffic on one-way streets. Hooligans haunt public places; mugging is common on city streets, in parks and shopping malls.

"Smokers light up tobacco products, apparently blind to NO SMOKING signs. Illegal drug use is pervasive. Jaywalkers and red-light-runners put all other motorists at risk. A green light has become a signal to proceed with extreme caution; a red light, but a warning to check for a nearby patrol car. "No parking" signs and metered limits are ignored; violators tear up tickets. Drunken drivers still kill 25,000 and injure 650,000 annually. According to surveys, speed limits are ignored by 83% of interstate highway drivers.

Industries dump hazardous waste (in the obvious hope it won't be discovered until too late to discover the source) and threaten the health of unsuspecting individuals who live nearby. When federal government officials subvert civil rights and environmental protection laws, when state legislatures enact insignificant fines for highway speeders, when local police not only belittle crimes against property with excuses and claims they are hamstrung by inadequate man-power, but are sometimes found conducting illicit activities themselves, we, who hope to live under the protection of law and in an orderly society, must raise our voices in protest.

Remaining silent gives tacit approval to lawlessness. The body of the people holds in its hands the only power that exists to maintain a lawful society. Only when people **demand**

good government, equal justice for all, and laws that apply to everyone be enforced, will beneficent democracy be assured. The wishes of the people, as a whole, must be made known in one voice.

"Morality cannot be legislated" is a truism we must recognize if we are to reduce wide-spread lawlessness. Morality, or what psychologists refer to as the super-ego, or religionists call conscience, is instilled in humans in life's earliest years.

Perhaps the problem is rooted in changes modern-day life has brought in our country: When both fathers and mothers are forced by economics to abdicate their parental roles and put character-formation of their children in the hands of day-care workers or paid babysitters, character-building suffers irreparable damage.

If there were but one change to be made in the average American home, it should be our insistence that one parent or the other raise the children that both bring into this world. Fathers and mothers care uniquely about the development of their children. Others may provide educational opportunity, may meet physical need, may even, to some extent, fill emotional needs; but only parents can instill the moral precepts through which youngsters can be taught, with consistency, concern for the rights and feelings of others, can gain self-esteem through approved behavior, can accept discipline from loving hands and, thereby, learn to discipline themselves.

Only parents can offer children sustained role-models upon which youngsters pattern their own behavior. A series of role-models, each with different standards and values, no matter how caring some of those may be, is no substitute for parents who consistently guide children in paths they should follow.