



Focus on radical caring

Sharon Lebell

Be a citizen of the world (Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1.9) is an oft-quoted phrase. Other translations express this teaching as “citizen of the universe,” or “citizen of God.” However stated, there is a lot packed into this short assertion.

Hazards of narrow focus

First, Epictetus asks us to consider the limitations of seeing ourselves merely in terms of our local ties to city, clan, or station in life. He’s pointing out the hazards of provincialism; how they constrict and petrify our world view, impairing our ability to reason clearly.

In some translations the language implies that Epictetus is asking us to be a citizen of the universe to affirm our accountability and attachment to God, or if you prefer, Nature; to remember we answer to something higher than advancing our own self-interest. This calls to mind that flippant prayer: “Dear God: You are God, and I’m not.”

What it means to be citizen

Since the United States General Election many of us are revisiting the question of what being a citizen means. As a child in elementary school, I was given grades in citizenship. I didn’t know what that meant. Saluting the flag when a guy blew a bugle? Playing well with others? As a fatuous teenager I thought that citizenship was a kind of jingoism. Recent dramatic political

events have made me appreciate Epictetus’ emphasis on the citizen as an imperative role and ideal.

Our identity as citizens is an indispensable part of any effort to steer ourselves toward virtue. At its essence a citizen is an active force for good, taking on the mantle of being beholden to others, choosing to be a morally-driven steward of the commonweal. We sideline our own infinitesimally small drama in favor of stepping up to a role that is vast and consequential. It’s a faith that our words and actions mean something and merit being marshaled for something bigger than the aggrandizement of ourselves, our search for comfort, and our attempts to avoid the uncomfortable.

Participants, not spectators

Embracing our roles as citizens is to accept that the social, economic, and material conditions of our lives are not accidental, nor the result of distantly abstract policies or some bad guys out there who are making our lives a drag. Whatever is going on in our schools, towns, counties, states, provinces, countries, world is on us to shape. Claiming our roles as citizens, rather than being spectators cackling in the peanut gallery, is radical caring.

The importance of caring

The exercise of radical caring is analeptic. It restores and strengthens our

communities while exerting a remedial effect on our souls. As citizens we get over ourselves while working for beneficial change. We feel real connections to others. It is in these connections—these caring reciprocities— and our quest for a just and peaceable society that the very reason for our lives takes form.

Caring is not passive

Philosopher Milton Mayeroff wrote a beautiful essay about caring. He says we cannot care by mere habit. Moral values are inherent in and are burnished in the process of caring and the growth it fosters. Caring is an ethic of response which is good medicine for depression, helplessness, dissociation, and fear.

Radical caring is the opposite of closing ourselves off through fear of the unknown. Mayeroff says that “caring becomes my way of thanking for what I have received.” Radical caring fosters a basic trust in life that makes our hearts and minds accessible to all that is true, good, and worthwhile. Try it, you’ll like it.

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