

Take responsibility and increase your personal power

October 1998: Terrence Dickson of Bristol, Pennsylvania was exiting a house he finished robbing by way of the garage. He was not able to get the garage door to go up - the automatic door opener was malfunctioning. He couldn't re-enter the house because the door connecting the house and garage locked when he pulled it shut. The family was on vacation, so Mr. Dickson found himself locked in the garage for eight days. He subsisted on a case of Pepsi he found, and a large bag of dry dog food. This upset Mr. Dickson, so he sued the homeowner claiming the situation caused him undue mental anguish. The jury agreed to the tune of half a million dollars and change.

May 2000: A Philadelphia restaurant was ordered to pay Amber Carson of Lancaster Pennsylvania \$113,500.00 after she slipped on a spilled soft drink and broke her coccyx. The beverage was on the floor because Ms. Carson threw it at her boyfriend 30 seconds earlier during an argument.

January 2000: Kathleen Robertson of Austin Texas was awarded \$780,000.00 by a jury of her peers after breaking her ankle tripping over a toddler who was running amuck inside a furniture store. The owners of the store were surprised at the verdict because the misbehaving tyke was Ms. Robertson's son.

December 1997: Kara Walton of Claymont, Delaware successfully sued the owner of a night club in a neighboring city when she fell from the bathroom window to the floor and knocked out her two front teeth. This occurred while Ms. Walton was trying to sneak through the window in the lady's room to avoid paying the \$3.50 cover charge. She was awarded \$12,000.00 and dental expenses.

No, this column is not about why Yankees should not be allowed to serve on juries. True, we in Canada are not as "litigation mad" as our friends south of the border, but we have our own parallels.

In the above cases the litigants, who suffered as a result of their own stupidity or wrong-doing, were able to pass on responsibility for their own actions to someone else. There is a certain comfort to being able to blame someone else. I once had a student who convinced himself that his failing grades were a result of his decision to attend an aunt's funeral. By blaming others he was able to avoid looking at his own skill level. He protected his academic self-esteem, but at the cost of stunting his growth as a student.

We may have become a nation of blamers. Husbands blame wives; feminists blame men; workers blame bosses; management blames unions; the West blames the East; nationalists blame the United States, Christians blame "the world". Sometimes the motivation for blaming is, as was the case with the U.S. litigants, to get something for nothing, but one motivation is always present: to make ourselves feel better. The cost is that we do not then benefit from looking at ourselves. It is better to avoid blame altogether, and, instead, ask ourselves "What small step can I take to make things better?".

It is not always easy to avoid blaming. I work with victims of residential school abuse and their descendants. Many survivors of the church run schools suffer from conditions such as stress, anxiety or depression. Their descendants may abuse alcohol, have poor parenting skills or low self esteem. As a native person, it may be too easy to blame the churches or colonialism for personal failings that I really have the power to correct. Blaming can be a way of giving up my personal power, and giving that power to someone else. If I say to myself "I would be happy if it wasn't for what the priest did", then I am really giving the power over my own happiness to that priest. Healing involves taking back my power, of claiming responsibility for the things I choose to do.

Psychologist Victor Frankl survived the German death camps during World War II. He said the one thing that helped him keep his sanity was the knowledge that he had the power choose how he was going to react in any situation. We can all choose to react with dignity. If we choose to wallow in blame, we will harm our selves further.

I am glad to live in a country that has, so far, avoided the litigation excesses so common in the U.S.A. We can choose to be responsible for our own actions and our own personal happiness. We can avoid blaming, and, instead, take back our personal power.