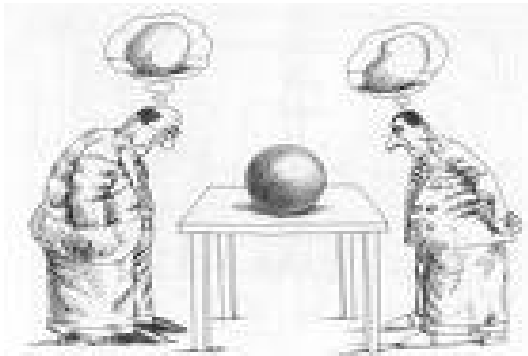


Am I my Brother's Keeper?

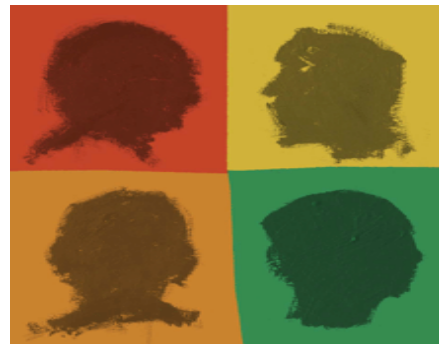
I

This is an age-old question raised by mankind regarding our mutual responsibility to each other. During the reign of Mahabali and throughout the ages many have said 'yes' to the question while even greater numbers have said 'no'! In this period of globalization it is still a very relevant question, the answer to which continues to affect people's behavior and attitudes. The question can be looked at in society from a micro (interpersonal/small groups) level or from a macro (societal/structural) level. They also overlap.



I would like to use a few concepts from social sciences-especially sociology and psychology, to explore the question of individual influence on each other as well as societal influence on individuals and groups - for "building up" and for "tearing down" *individuals and groups*.

Self-Concept: "Looking-Glass Self and Self-fulfilling Prophecy". C.H.Cooley and Symbolic Interactionists remind us that our "self-concept" is formed not in a vacuum but derived from what other people think about us – more exactly, what we *think* other people *think about us*. It is not what other people actually think, but our *perception* of the same that affects us positively or negatively. And here lies the problem. We often misunderstand what the other person is thinking or even saying. Those who are married should have no problem understanding this. How often do spouses discover (after the storm of heated arguments has died down) that their argument was based on the misunderstanding of the meaning of words or actions of the other person?



So we have to be careful in stating our ideas and feelings in clear language and make sure

that the other person understands us. Even more importantly, we have to listen carefully and empathetically and make sure from the other person that our understanding of him/her is accurate. When we are not sure, give the benefit of the doubt and assume the best rather than the worst about the other person! A word or phrase may not have the same meaning for two persons belonging to different generations, sub-cultures etc. The same words, actions, dress etc are understood differently by different groups.



One example is the difficulty for both early and later immigrants to understand and appreciate each other's points of view. Often the "ABCD's" ("American-born children of Desis") and the "FOB's" ("Fresh off the boat" newcomers) cannot understand each other and they look down on the other group. In reality, once both groups try to communicate and respect each other, they will be able to learn from each other both culturally and practically.

The positive expectations of our parents, close relatives and friends when conveyed to us and internalized become *positive self-fulfilling prophecies* for us. They guide our aspirations and give us confidence in ourselves and help us develop a positive self-concept. This is not automatic. Sometimes parents and friends convey, even though unintentionally, very negative

messages. For example, when a parent constantly reprimands or criticizes a child for not getting an A (rather than appreciating the B+ or A- that the child did get), the child comes to believe that he or she is never "good-enough" in their parents' eyes. The



parents assume that children will automatically know that they love them and have great appreciation for their achievements. In reality, we have to be specific not only in expressing our criticisms, but more so in articulating our admiration and appreciation.

Genuine words of appreciation and encouragement *should always precede* constructive suggestions for improvements that may be needed. *People are starved for appreciation!* Children and adults have abilities which do not get expressed or developed due to the *failure* of those who are emotionally close, such as, parents, spouses, siblings, and friends (even, acquaintances and strangers!) to encourage and believe in the other person! The same is true of those who are authority figures, such as, teachers, bosses, and supervisors.



I started writing these articles for *Sameeksha*, because one good friend asked me to do so- an expression of faith in me. I felt flattered! Continuing words of encouragement keep me going. When I ask students in my class to write an evaluation of the courses that I teach, I instruct that they first write “good things” about the course - even if they have to make it up! - on one side of the 3x5 card and only then, on the other side, “suggestions for improvement” (not, criticisms)! You can always find something good to say about even the worst teacher (or anyone), if you think hard enough!

Just as we need the re-assurance from the mirror (more often than we want to admit!) to know that we look alright we need frequent reassurance from our parents, spouses, friends, and bosses “to know” that we are o.k. or that we are doing alright. This positive feed-back is very important and nourishing for every individual. This does not, as I have pointed out earlier, preclude the necessity for constructive criticism and high expectations regarding performance at home, school, and workplace.

Every child is full of talents which only a caring loving family and community can

help develop and to flourish. Community organizations like KANE play a vital role in providing children opportunities and encouragement to develop their abilities and more important, to develop self-confidence. As adults we have to be aware of the fact that often we play a critical role (positive or negative) in encouraging or destroying people.



II

Effect on Groups and Communities. At a societal level, the dominant community or culture often arrogate to themselves all positive values and superiority and the reverse is assumed of newer or less “successful” communities. This can be true of all powerful groups comparatively speaking, such as upper classes, upper castes, men, ethnic and language groups. So, the WASPS (*White Anglo-Saxon Protestants*), the earliest immigrants in the US, used to look down upon each of the new immigrant groups, such as the Irish, the Italian, the Polish and of course, the Blacks in varying degrees. The Asians now are also recipients of the same treatment in many respects.



Lower economic classes are treated as “inferiors” in every society. *This can and has had very negative consequences for every minority community.* The “less powerful” have to make sure that they resist this process of marginalization. Every group has to become aware of this process for what it is: a universal human tendency, which we also practice in the societies we came from.

“All men are created equal” is an ideal which can be truly practiced only when we become ethically and spiritually sensitive. We have to also fight for creating and maintaining social, economic, legal and political structures which guarantee to every person, irrespective of caste, color, creed, and gender, “*equality of opportunity*” in the broadest sense of the phrase.



Consciousness-raising in terms of one’s own race, class, gender, ethnicity, etc is very

important to resist the “negative self-fulfilling prophecy” that is a reality for many minority communities which unconsciously accept the inferior position that the dominant groups assign to them! We have to be thankful to “Black Power” movements and later Women’s movements in promoting the concept of intrinsic worth of their culture and traditions. Every group has to be subjected to the same universal principles of love, respect, and service in evaluating them - nobody should get an automatic “A” or “E”! However, building ethnic pride, without sliding into ethnic chauvinism, is a difficult balancing act.



I think that it is Martin Luther King who said: *every person has potential for greatness because every person can serve.* Let us realize that each one of us is “responsible” (a great privilege indeed) for the growth and development of the other person. The African saying: “It takes a village to raise a child” also reflects the same idea. *Yes I am my brother’s keeper!* Let us try to be the best brother/sister and neighbor to each other. May the memory of Mahabali and his rule be an inspiration to us!

Happy Onam to everyone!

- Rev. Abraham Thomas