What’s my Responsibility?

Grades: 7-12

Language Arts 3.1.7 G./3.1.8 G. and 3.1.12.G., 6, 9, 13, 15, 18

Science 5.3.12.C.1

Social Studies 6.1.12.C.14.b

Subjects: Government, Contemporary Problems, Psychology, Ethics

Grades: 9-12

Teaching Time: One to Two Class Periods

Focus: Solid Waste, Problem Solving, Personal Responsibility

**Pre & Post Test Question**

What are two things individuals can do to help solve problems of solid waste?

**Rationale**

People often feel powerless to do anything about enormous economic, political, or social problems. Solid waste is an example of an issue where personal action toward a solution may seem insignificant. Even if individual action by itself cannot solve these large problems, it can be the basis for a positive, personally enriching way of living.

**Learning Objective**

Students will:

· Examine how their perception of a problem affects their response to that problem by using solid waste as an example.

· Examine the individual’s and government’s responsibility in solving social problems, and define ways they, acting as individuals or in a group, can take responsibility for solutions.

**Learning Procedure**

**Part I: Personal Responsibility and Solid Waste**

Have students read the article included in this lesson, *‘‘My Twenty Foot Swath’’*

Ask students questions about the man in the article:

· What worries this man?

· What does he try to do about it?

· Does he think his response is effective?

· What response do you make when faced with a problem of this kind?

· What is RAO? (Responsibility Assumption Overload) Have you ever felt RAO? In relation to what?

Use the problem of solid waste as an example of an area where RAO may have occurred for some people.

Have students consider the following facts.

· The average person in New Jersey disposes of 5.4 lbs. of garbage per day.

· A thousand tons of uncompacted waste would cover a half-acre of land three feet deep.

RAO is a likely response to a problem of this size.

Discuss the possible solutions to the problem of waste.

· Who, ultimately, is responsible for solving our solid waste problems ---- county, state, or federal government; those we elect; only those who generate the waste; you?

· Should government strictly regulate disposal of all types of household waste? Should government force people to recycle?

· Is it reasonable to expect that individual action has a chance of solving a problem of this size?

· If not, what do you see happening? More and more land used for landfills? Massive contamination problems caused by these landfills? Increased ocean dumping? More resource recovery plants? Use of technology in a yet undiscovered way of handling waste?

**Part II: Other Large Issues and Personal Responsibility**

Ask students to identify other large economic/ political/ social issues they perceive they can do nothing about.

Some examples might be:

· Nuclear war

· Hunger

· Industrial pollution

· Overpopulation

· Unemployment

· Inflation

Have students pick one of these topics or pick one you are currently studying, and list all possible solutions. Identify individual responses that can help solve this problem.

Ask:

· How do individual solutions differ from large organized solutions (i.e., governmental or institutional efforts)?

· How do the benefits differ? Is there any good to be realized from an individual action even when it won’t be sufficient to solve the problem?

What is the law’s role in determining individual response to the problems?

Can you think of any laws that demand or encourage personal or corporate responsibility?

· What legal problems might result from a law requiring people to aid accident or rape victims? (The ‘‘Good Samaritan’’ law in Washington State states that you cannot be held liable for civil damages for any action taken in good faith and not for compensation while trying to assist at the scene of an accident.)

· The manufacturers of Agent Orange, the defoliant used in the Vietnam War, were sued to establish responsibility for the alleged subsequent health effects of dioxin on veterans. Should the manufacturers have been held liable? (According to law, the federal government cannot be held liable for injuries sustained in war.)

· As a response to the enormous litter problem, do you think the Washington State law requiring litter bags in every car and a $50 minimum fine and/or litter pickup for persons convicted of littering has been effective?

· What responsibility do companies manufacturing hazardous waste have for its disposal? Should the government regulate disposal? What are the company’s responsibilities if the wastes are discovered years later? Regulating businesses can be expensive. Who should pay for regulation ---- the government (which eventually means taxpayers), the consumers who use the products, the company itself?

· In terms of managing solid waste, should the state attempt to regulate behavior by laws such as the ‘‘Bottle Bill,’’ which attempts to promote recycling by imposing a mandatory surcharge on all beverage containers?

· Should counties and cities enact ‘‘flow control’’ laws that strictly regulate disposal of waste? (Flow control measures are enacted to ensure a steady stream of waste to burn in resource recovery plants.)

Ask students to think of a large local problem about which they feel ---- ‘‘I really should do something about this,’’ (e.g., your reaction to seeing hungry or homeless people in your city).

Did students do anything about the problem? Why? or Why not? If not, what keeps people from being the solution? What keeps them from taking that final step of action?

Are there any community problems you have helped resolve, even in the smallest way? If you have, what problems were solved?

What benefits did you derive from participating in the solution (i.e., made friends, learned something, opened door for employment, gained satisfaction in doing something worthwhile, learned to approach problems in a positive, active way)?

Compare your feeling of accomplishment to that of the man in ‘‘My Twenty Foot Swath’’?

**Part III: A Personal Responsibility Activity**

Have the class identify a waste, litter, or recycling problem as the man in the article did, and determine what to do about it.

The solutions may or may not be immediately obvious.

Individual action you can take right now:

· Start source separation and recycling at home.

· Be a responsible buyer. Look for products packaged in reusable and recyclable containers.

· Compost waste.

· Speak up against litter! [Report Illegal Dumping to the DEP](https://survey123.arcgis.com/share/dbaf15da14d54e84ac3afb8ce89b46b9)

My Twenty Foot Swath

**Kenneth V. Lundberg**

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‘‘I worried so much about world hunger today, that I went home and ate five cookies.’’ Did personal or global problems ever become so overwhelming that you were immobilized, or driven to some action that actually aggravated the problem? Have you experienced such frustration about the hopelessness of solving the problems of poverty, environmental pollution, or human suffering that you could avoid it only by deciding that you were powerless to do anything about their alleviation? This is called Responsibility Assumption Overload (RAO). Here’s how I dealt with this feeling.

I park my car away from my building at work. That way I get both exercise and a parking space, as everyone else competes for spots next to the entrance. My morning and late afternoon strolls take me on a stretch of lawn between the tennis courts and the soccer field, and across an occasionally used softball diamond. The lawn is twenty feet wide, more or less. Soft and green, it was originally very littered. Tennis players discard tennis ball containers (and their flip-tops), worn out sweat socks, broken shoelaces and energy candy bar wrappers. Soccer game spectators leave behind beer bottles and junk food cellophane.

In my early days it disgusted me, and my thoughts centered on ways of correcting the situation: writing letters to the campus newspaper (no doubt totally ignored); campaigning for anti-litter regulations (who would enforce them?); organizing a ‘‘Zap-Day’’ cleanup (leaving 364 days for littering). All my noble efforts would have demonstrated my indignation, raised my blood pressure, and attracted attention, but they would not have changed the appearance and/or condition of the area.

So, I decided to take ownership. I would be the solution. I did not tell anyone of this; it was probably against some rule or another. I decided that I would be responsible for the environmental quality of this twenty-foot swath. I did not care what other parts of the campus were like. They were someone else’s problem. But each day, going from and to my car, I picked up litter.

At first, it was as much as I could conveniently carry. Then I made a game of it, limiting my picking to ten items each way. It was an exciting day when I realized I was picking faster than ‘‘they’’ were littering. Finally, the great day arrived when I looked back on my twenty feet of lawn - now perfectly clean.

Where did I put the litter? At first, I brought it into a wastebasket in the building, or took it to the car to bring home. Then a curious thing happened. One day, large orange barrels appeared at each end of my swath. Someone in maintenance had become my silent conspirator - periodically emptying and replacing the barrels. He, too, knew the wisdom of keeping a low profile about it all.

I’ve done this for several years now. Has general campus appearance changed? Not much! Have litterers stopped littering? No! Then if nothing has changed, why bother?

Here lies the secret. Something has changed. My twenty-foot swath - and me! That five-minute walk is a high spot of the day. Instead of fussing and stewing and storing up negative thoughts, I begin and end my workday in a positive mood. My perspective is brighter. I can enjoy my immediate surroundings - and myself - as I pass through a very special time space.

‘‘It is better because of me. I am better because of ’’it." ‘‘We’’ enjoy the relationship. Maybe, even, ‘‘it’’ looks forward with anticipation to my coming.

With a brighter outlook, I have learned a lot of things that would have gone unnoticed. For instance, I have learned that tennis players grunt a lot. There 172 A-Way With Waste seems to be some correlation between the quality of the grunt, especially on serve, and the quality of one’s game. Maybe I have discovered the secret of the game. I have also learned that soccer players curse a lot, but there does not seem to be any correlation between that ability and soccer skills. I have even learned that most soccer spectators, at least at my college, come to eat, drink, and talk - not to watch the game.

My learning - and the twenty-foot swath - does not stop at the building door. There is an important principle that follows wherever I go. I cannot solve man’s inhumanity to man, but I can affirm, with a smile and a word of appreciation, those who feel burdened by the need to work at lowly jobs. I cannot right the imbalances of centuries of discrimination, but I can ‘‘lift up’’ someone who feels the weight of a poor self-image. I can treat women as equals without solving the problems of sex discrimination. I can seek out the social and economic litter in my own ‘‘twenty-foot swath’’ without demanding of myself that I ‘‘clean up the whole world.’’

I now practice a discipline of leaving each time-space capsule of my life a little better than when I entered it. Each personal contact, each event, each room I enter becomes a small challenge. I want to leave it improved, but more important, I am responsible to myself to be improved; and thereby, maybe - just maybe - my having been there will make life better for someone else.

I am becoming more and more disenchanted and suspicious of revolutionaries, crusaders, militants, and do-gooders. Many, if not most, seem to be more concerned about being right than being loving or effectual. The zealot, no matter how well-intentioned, often leaves a trail of wounded people while in pursuit of the cause.

Is this all too myopic - shutting one’s eyes to the greater concerns? It does not need to be! I now have a twenty-foot swath. Next year it may be forty, or sixty, or eighty feet wide. Ten talents were not required of him who had been given only one. Too many people stumble by taking on causes too great for their level of discernment and discipline. They need to begin to catch the vision of the important promise, that the meek shall inherit the earth, not the indignant or frustrated.

This lesson was adapted from the State of Washington’s *A-Way With Waste* program.

Teachers should note that New Jersey residents and businesses are required to recycle many materials (see recyclenj.org for information), but the government can’t direct everything people do. We no longer see disposal of waste by ocean dumping, and landfills are built to contain waste and prevent leachate, but people continue to litter, and we still use resources without careful consideration of long term consequences.