

CHARACTER



Responsibility

January 2004

RESPONSIBILITY: “that for which one is responsible; a duty or trust.”

“He who conquers himself is greater than he that conquers an army.”

Oriental saying

Ralph Waldo Emerson captures the essence of fulfilling your duty and responsibility in the following quote: “Don’t waste life in doubts and fears; spend yourself on the work before you, well assured that the right performance of this hour’s duties will be the best preparation for the hours and ages that will follow it.” The experience of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain during the civil war especially during such epic struggles as Antietam, Fredericksburg and, most notably, Gettysburg, give credence to Emerson’s words. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain didn’t enter the greater public consciousness until the 1993 release of the movie *Gettysburg*. Since that time I have read quite a bit about him, most recently in a book entitled Leadership Moments, by Michael Useem. I have referred to it to verify some of the dates, places, and other specifics in this article.

I admire Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain not only for his courage and valor, but also for his compassionate regard for others, dedication to scholarship, and humility, qualities not often associated with gritty war heroes. Obviously, as a decorated war hero and winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, Chamberlain showed exceptional bravery and skill on the battlefield. His most renowned moment came in the summer of 1863 at the battle of Gettysburg. Chamberlain received orders to defend and maintain the extreme left of the Union line at a small wooded hillock known as Little Round Top. He knew he and his 478 men must hold their ground at all costs, because if Confederate artillery gained access to the high ground, they could decimate the rest of the Union line spread out beside them.

Confederate commanders also realized the strategic significance of Little Round Top and accordingly ordered wave after wave of attacks. After the fifth wave of Rebel soldiers had retreated, Chamberlain’s defensive perimeter remained unbroken but severely damaged. As the Rebel soldiers began to regroup and prepare for yet another assault, the surviving soldiers of Colonel Chamberlain’s 20th Maine regiment informed him that they had exhausted their ammunition. Chamberlain’s bold solution was to order a bayonet charge. The message was relayed along the ranks and a blue line doggedly swept down the hill,

completely catching the Rebels by surprise, sending them into a panicked withdraw. Several days, and 50,000 deaths later, the Union had won the most decisive engagement of the Civil War. It is widely believed that had Little Round Top fallen, Gettysburg would have turned into a rout, and the Union would have been forced to sue for peace, forever altering the course of American history.

What many don’t recognize is that it was Joshua’s sense of responsibility and compassionate regard for others that probably, and somewhat ironically, allowed the bloody defensive stand at Little Round Top to be successful. Several weeks prior to Gettysburg, Chamberlain was given charge of 120 mutineers with orders to shoot any that wouldn’t fulfill their duty. Chamberlain informed the mutineers of his orders, but instead of threatening and browbeating them, he kindly acknowledged their grievances, fed them, and appealed to their love of freedom and brotherhood. After several days of continual dignified treatment, the mutineers acquiesced and rallied around the flag. It is almost certain that without the additional strength of those 120 men, Little Round Top would have fallen. Several years later at the conclusion of the war, Chamberlain again demonstrated his considerate disposition after being selected to receive the formal surrender of General Robert E. Lee’s veteran troops. In a gesture of respect and goodwill, he graciously ordered his men to salute as the shattered Confederate army passed by.

Joshua’s determination to fulfill his responsibility also served him well in his continual pursuit of education and intellectual advancement. Before the war, Chamberlain labored as college professor of rhetoric and oration, which in itself was a remarkable feat, considering his teenage struggles with stammering. Before his death in 1914, caused by the lingering effects of six battlefield wounds, Chamberlain taught himself to play several instruments and speak nine different languages. His devotion to scholarship eventually earned him a Master’s Degree and a position as president of Bowdoin College. He also authored several books during his four terms as the governor of Maine.

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“The price of greatness is responsibility.”
Winston Churchill

“When I do good, I feel good; when I don’t do good, I don’t feel good.”
Abraham Lincoln

“I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble.
The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker.”
Helen Keller

Book List

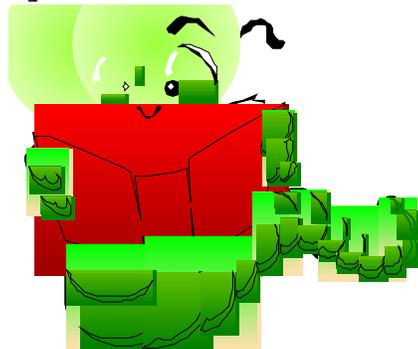
The Fortune Tellers
by Lloyd Alexander

The Rainbabies
by Laura Krauss
Melmed

Mr. Grumpy's Outing
by John Burningham

Heckedy Peg
by Don and Audrey
Wood

On My Honor
by Marion Dane Bauer



Another evidence of Chamberlain's noble character was his humility. On account of his extensive education, Chamberlain was immediately offered his own command and the rank of colonel when he volunteered for military duty. He modestly declined, however, and accepted a lower rank believing he should master the art of war and earn the privilege to lead.

In addition, visitors to Little Round Top today, notice that a monument to salute Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain is conspicuously absent. That is because, at Chamberlain's direct request, no statue was erected even though a location had been selected and a artisan had already been commissioned. Though it is a meager and insignificant attempt, I hope these words honor Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain as a man of the highest moral character, taking responsibility for his duties very seriously, and possessed the finest qualities for which each of us strive.

As each of us fulfills our responsibilities and make our little town of Lindon a better place, it would do us well to remember the words of Theodore Roosevelt taken from a speech given in Paris at the Sorbonne in 1910. "It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause, who at best knows achievement and who at the worst if he fails at least fails while daring greatly so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat." Let us work every day to do what we should, whether we want to or not. Fulfilling our responsibilities makes us a better person.

Karl Bowman Jason Theler
Principal Assistant Principal
Rocky Mountain Elementary School

Family Activities

-Talk about the responsibilities of each family member. As each member completes his share of the work, add a penny to the Responsibility Jar. At the end of the month, celebrate using the accumulated pennies for a treat.

-Have a Responsibility Dinner. Take the family to the grocery store. One member is responsible for purchasing the drink, another the vegetable, another the entree, etc. Talk about the importance of doing one's part in a family.

-Benjamin Franklin was born on January 17, 1706. He helped to establish the first subscription library in the American colonies. A library relies on responsible patrons. What other organizations or businesses rely on responsible people?

By Laura Clement

We, at Character Connection would like to focus on helping parents access character materials this year by using the web site located at www.thecharacterconnection.com. If you are interested in receiving a monthly reminder of the character traits and access to resource materials, please e-mail your address to arlainea@isquaredinc.com

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