

## **American Dream Project on Moral Imagination**

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Having moral imagination means that when we see the poor and ill-prepared victims of Hurricane Katrina desperately awaiting rescue, we don't condemn them for being lazy, dependent, dirty, and ignorant. We don't write them off saying they are getting what they deserve because they don't have the gumption to do something on their own. Instead we wonder how *we* might react if we had been born to a 15-year-old unwed mother who was the daughter of a 16-year-old unwed mother. What might *we* think if we never had a father, mother, or an educated, responsible adult who really cared about us? What life skills might *we* know if no one taught us how to read or to do even basic arithmetic or inspired us about our unlimited possibilities? What might *we* aspire to be if our only heroes were athletes and entertainers and we had no extraordinary talent in those pursuits? What choices might we make if the people in our world were mostly violent, always angry and constantly threatening?

Our moral imagination is our greatest spiritual gift. If we refuse to use it and simply look at other's suffering as only the result of "their own irresponsible choices" than we fail the source of our higher nature. We're no better than a clan of animals, caring only for "our own kind."

Have we come to accept that for some people a war zone world is what they get because somehow they deserve it? Do we really believe that because a tiny few learn to swim that the millions who drown have it coming to them? Isn't it time for each of us to look in the mirror? Isn't it time to grab our policy makers by the lapels and slap them out of their stupor?

Welfare failed because we gave people money instead of opportunities. Diplomas instead of an education. But this doesn't mean we can accept failure. Every time people are given money or assets without responsibility the recipients are crippled. They become angry and resentful because they are being treated as incapable. To really lift the

poor, the ignorant, and irresponsible requires much more than writing checks. It requires systematically providing relevant education, mentoring, leadership, honest feedback, and opportunities to succeed. Whenever these elements are present, people claim their own dignity. They relieve their own suffering. They restore their own hope.

But all this requires much more than money. It requires love. Yes, love. From all of us. This is a commitment of a higher order of magnitude than simply providing liberty and justice. It requires the conscious will of a morally mature society. It requires the understanding that the quality of a nation is judged not by the success of the privileged but by the opportunities of the poorest. *When we are ready to treat the least of us with the same dignity as the best of us, the least and best will melt into all of "U.S."* It's all a choice.

What we have become is simply not who we are.

It's time to choose, again.