FOR WHOM ARE WE RESPONSIBLE?

The dictionary defines “responsible” as “having control or authority,” or “being accountable for one’s actions and decisions.” To be responsible for someone in this sense seems to mean using our power in good faith: not abusing it, and not failing to use it when called upon to do so. A legal dictionary broadens the definition of ‘responsible’ to include, “characterized by trustworthiness, integrity.” In this sense, to be responsible is to be faithful—to our relationships with others, and to our own history and calling. Today, we’re going to being by reading a poem by poet Lowell Jaeger.

Okay
Lowell Jaeger

There’s a man in the road, waving.
We’re driving home from Hot Springs,
my wife and I, and our three kids.
He’s holding something bundled
in his arms. Don’t stop, my wife
telegraphs to me with a sideways glance.
I’m okay with that.

It’s a dog! the kids shout, He’s
carrying a dog! So, okay, I stop,
roll down the window.

Please help, the man says, tears
leaking down his stubbled chin.
The dog is bleeding. He’s rolled up
in an old rug, eyes open, miserable.
I just run over my dog, the man
blubbers, He’s drunk. And stinks.

Okay, I’m thinking, I’m stuck
with this. The kids squeeze together;
the man and dog huff and groan,
sniffle and slide themselves into
our lives. My kids’ faces in the rearview
are pinched, afraid to breathe –
wet dog, blood, booze, rotting socks.
The man whimpers, cradles his dog,
I’m f-ing sorry, man. So f-ing, f-ing
sorry. This is less than okay.
We spit gravel behind us and speed
back to Hot Springs to find a Vet.

It’s a Sunday, my wife whispers, everything’s
locked up. I’m thinking, Okay, what now?
At the one payphone on Main, I pull over
to let the man and dog out. You better call
someone, I say. My voice sounds afraid.
The man’s eyes are shut, not asleep,
but almost. The dog’s eyes are shut, too.
You better call someone, I say louder,
Okay? Okay?

The man stands at the payphone, his dog
bundled on the sidewalk. He just stands there.
My kids cry silently. My wife trusts me
to be the man she hopes I am. I don’t
know what’s okay and what’s not. The man
is fumbling in his empty pockets for change.
I feel a lot like that.
Questions for Discussion:

What's happening in the poem?
- Is there anything in the poem that isn’t clear to you?
- Who is in the car?
- What do they see on the side of the road?
- What happens?
- What is the situation for everyone at the end of the poem?

What's the author’s intent?
- Why did the man driving the car stop? Why do you think he first didn’t stop, and then later did?
- Who, if anyone, do you think is taking responsibility for something or someone in this story? Who, if anyone, is neglecting responsibility in this story?
- What do you think of the family leaving the man and his dog at the pay phone? Did they have a responsibility to do anything more? Why or why not?
- What do you think the man means at the end of the poem when he says, “My wife trusts me to be the man she hopes I am”? What kind of man do you think she trusts him to be?

How does it resonate with us?
- Would you have stopped the car if you were driving? Why or why not?
- What things do you consider when deciding if you feel like you have a duty or responsibility to someone?
- Who do you think has a responsibility for/to you?
- Think of a group or community that you identify with—this might be a group you consider yourself included in based on something like gender, nationality, race, sexuality, or religion; it might be a large community of people with shared interests; or something else. What, if anything, do you consider to be your responsibility to others in that group with you? (That is, do you feel there is any particular behavior, action, or attitude you owe them because you share an identity?) And is there any responsibility you think the group you belong to has toward others who are not a part of your identified group?

This handout represents an activity that is one part of an Ask Big Questions conversation. Ask Big Questions is a project devoted to helping people connect and expand their understanding through a model of intentional conversation. It’s called Ask Big Questions because the questions we lead reflection on are ones we believe matter to everyone and everyone can answer. They might be challenging questions, but they’re not “hard;” they’re not questions that require expertise to answer. They’re questions we all have stories about, questions all of us share. Our experience shows us that asking and talking about Big Questions as a group helps us learn to genuinely hear one another. Big Question conversations help us learn about and consider different experiences and perspectives, while also revealing and building connection. This experience of mutuality helps us grow our ability to trust each other. It builds community.

Please contact us if you would like to learn more about our model of conversation and how it can be used in a wide variety of settings.