

A black and white portrait of Andrew Wallas, an older man with white hair, smiling slightly. The portrait is framed by a thick gold border.

ANDREW WALLAS
AN ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY FOR
LIFE & WORK

RADICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Harness the events of life for your own evolution

Responding, or responsibility, comes from the Latin word 'respondere' which means to respond. So, for me, it is really all about what is our response to what is happening in our lives? At the end of the 16th century, the meaning developed to include 'answerable to' or 'expected to justify.' In the 17th century responsibility was also extended to include the idea of accountability.

Right now, my sense is that we've created radically different cultures around the world in places like North Korea, Afghanistan, Norway, Iran, Australia. And in all of these different cultures there's extraordinarily little responsibility or accountability on our planet right now. What I'm going to focus on tonight is the idea of a lack of responsibility. I'm not going to get into the debate about the difference between responsibility and accountability and I will use both these terms interchangeably.

Each lifetime is made up of millions of events, most of which are mundane. We wake up, we make a cup of tea, we shower, we get dressed. Other events are more meaningful; we make a good friend, we fall in love, we establish a new business, we move house. Then there are traumatic events; we get divorced, loved ones die – these are life changing events. Of course, there's an awful lot in between but every one of these events makes up a lifetime.

It seems to me that there are only two different ways to respond, i.e. take responsibility in relation to all these events. And the first and most dominant response is that we see life as something that happens to us. We have a lot of expressions for this; "she was dealt a difficult

set of cards”, “he had an unbelievable amount of bad luck” and so on. This is the dominant zeitgeist in most cultures, but importantly not all cultures. The idea that life is something that happens around us and to us. The difficulty with this approach, or this response to life, is that it makes us like a cork bobbing around in the ocean. We are continually a victim to life’s ups and downs, reacting to the vicissitudes of life. An illness might strike or cancer arises, we lose our jobs, loved ones die and so we see life as something that is continually and constantly happening to us. The problem with this response to life is that it is always someone else’s, or something else’s responsibility for what happens. It might be life itself, or governments, or spouses, or bosses. In accepting that life happens to us we abrogate our responsibility to life or to other people.

The second alternative, which is much rarer, is the idea that life happens for us. Each and every one of the millions of events that happen throughout our lifetime actually occur for our benefit, our evolution, or our growth. Another version of this response, or this approach, is that we unconsciously create the life we live for our individual evolution, healing, or development. This places the emphasis squarely and fairly on us, as opposed to anyone else or life itself. If we respond to life in this way, then we start by asking a different question: which is “how or why is this designed to support me?” Obviously, for all of us, when life doesn’t evolve in the way that we think it should, or the way that we want it to - if we lose a job, or a lover walks out, or worse still we get cancer - then we have a very difficult question to ask. But for me it’s a very intelligent question. What am I here to learn from this? How is this supporting me?



RADICAL RESPONSIBILITY IS REALLY THE IDEA THAT WE STOP BLAMING ANYONE OR ANYTHING ELSE FOR HOW WE FEEL, FOR OUR SITUATION AND FOR WHAT IS GOING ON IN OUR LIFE.

Under the first option we are continually holding someone or something else responsible for our current situation. And in our current situation, we might be miserable, we might be depressed, we might have a lack of money, we might be alone. Whatever it is, if we see life as something that is happening to us, then it's somebody else's fault, somebody else is responsible for that. Under the second option we are responsible for seeing the bigger picture and harnessing the events of life for our own evolution. This is what I'm calling radical responsibility. It is really the idea that we stop blaming anyone or anything else for how we feel, for our situation and for what is going on in our life.

Let's take two examples of this. Firstly, a big picture lack of responsibility. We currently live in a world where hundreds of millions of people spend hundreds of hours a week holding other

people responsible for their life. Candidates for this might be Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, people who we voted for, or we didn't vote for but spend copious waking hours criticising, complaining about what they are doing. It's all a complete dead end and a waste of time. Another more mundane example is that we spend huge amounts of time complaining about the weather. We're too hot or too cold – we are constantly blaming something that is outside of ourselves, when we have no power to change it.

Instead, we could be asking what is this here to teach me? How is this situation, how is Donald Trump, how is this Conservative government supporting my individual or collective evolution? It's a different approach and the same choice arises now in relation to the suffering and serious restrictions due to Covid-19. The first interpretation could lead us to say this is a ghastly, dangerous virus that is attacking us and killing our loved ones, and that view would have a lot of support. I'm suggesting that this leads to a dead end. The alternative response, the alternative responsibility is to say that this virus is the best attempt to get our attention and wake us up. It's not some kind of punishment, but it could be creative and healing. It is showing us that we're on the wrong pathway. I really don't say this lightly as I know many people have suffered as a result of the loss of loved ones, but these two starkly different positions are really indicative of our response to life, hence, our responsibility.

Responsibility lies in understanding that each situation is an opportunity. It's not something that we are a victim of. All too often we experience ourselves as a victim of life. A second example might be the area of personal relationships. In all close relationships, especially intimate relationships, we get hurt, we get triggered by other people, what somebody says or doesn't say, what somebody does or doesn't do. Understandably, we think that it's the other person and what they said or didn't say that creates the hurt and the suffering in us. All of us have experienced this time and time again. But what I'm suggesting is that it is never the other person. It's not outside of us, it's not what they said or what they do, it's always the case that the comment or the action of the other, even if it is intended to hurt us, is the catalyst that awakens or touches some old wound.

If we begin to enquire about that when it's happening in a relationship, and we take responsibility for our reaction, and take responsibility for the hurt and the suffering that is arising, then we see that it has nothing to do with the other person. It's always an old feeling, or an old pattern, or formation in us that is coming up in the present to allow us to move through it and heal that particular wound. This is what I call radical responsibility - for me it's a basic form of responsibility. I'm calling it radical responsibility because most people do not want to do it. Most people, including myself in a relationship, or in a difficult political situation, blame someone else. Our immediate, almost instinctive response is to make somebody else responsible for it. And in doing that we are abdicating our own responsibility.



WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I WAS CLEVER SO I WANTED TO CHANGE THE WORLD.

TODAY I AM WISE, SO I AM SEEKING TO CHANGE MYSELF.

What is the greatest lie of the human species? The answer that I came up with years ago, which I've never changed, is the idea that someone or something outside of me can make me happy. Another way of expressing that is that the greatest lie of human existence is the idea or belief that someone or something outside of us can make me unhappy. It seems fairly self-evident to me that my wife cannot make me happy, the weather cannot make me happy, that governments, or anything outside of me cannot determine my happiness. And yet every day we tend to give other people responsibility for how we are feeling, for how well we are doing at work or for our general welfare. Radical responsibility, or merely, responsibility, is simply taking responsibility for our own wellbeing, whether that's physical health, psychological health, spiritual health. It's about not looking outside ourselves for a solution.

Each one of us, as I've explained before, has a filter and a projector through which we meet reality. There is no such thing as pure reality; we all filter "reality" through our internal filter, then project out our inner biases on to others. Our filter and our projector comprise our cultural conditioning. It comes from our education, religion, early childhood, the family system or the family origin in which we grew up. It is also influenced by our maternal ancestral line and our paternal ancestral line. All of these patterns or formations that go into our filter and our projector are what we impose onto life. Yet the word "appreciation" literally means, "no prior experience". So, to appreciate something or someone requires us to come without any prior experience or sensation, which is pretty much impossible because of the amount of stuff that we bring to each situation. Each of our filters differs. It could be that our filter is gathered around rejection, or abandonment, or we might have issues with authority figures or with women, or trust issues. Each one of us has a slightly different blend of these patterns or formations. In the East, in Hinduism, Buddhism and in Indian philosophy they call these samskaras. Samskara is the Sanskrit word for formation or pattern. These are the mental impressions, or recollections or psychological imprints which we bring to reality.

What we tend to do in our response to life is to split off from these patterns within ourselves and project them out onto others. We project them onto Trump, Boris Johnson, spouses, friends, lovers. We do this relentlessly and wonder why we stay stuck or why we don't move forward. It is my suggestion that the reason that we have incarnated in this lifetime and the reason we are actually here is to heal these patterns. The main purpose of our lifetime is to take responsibility for moving through these ancestral patterns. Even as parents, if we were more honest, we

would see how we project our stuff, a lot of it unconscious, onto our children. Instead of taking responsibility for it, and looking into ourselves and recognising that we are here to heal our own stuff and not project it onto others.

It sounds simple and easy. It is simple, **but it's not easy**. But that is what we're here to do, on a daily basis. Each time we move through something that has been keeping us stuck in an old pattern, we have this tremendous sense of liberation. Stop trying to control the outside world and begin to change your own inner patterns. Rumi, the 13th Century Islamic Poet said: "when I was young, I was clever so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am seeking to change myself."

Q & A

Q: Can you give a practical example – for instance, what if someone is waiting to find out whether she is going to lose her job or not? If she loses her job, she may lose her house. How do you take radical responsibility for something like that?

The question in my mind is if this woman loses her job is that good or bad? I've got no idea. If she moves to a new house is that good or bad? Again, I've got no idea. She might move house and her old house might get destroyed two weeks later. We tend to label situations quickly on very limited information. If somebody gets cancer is that good or bad? I often share that I know around thirty people who have had cancer and who would say today that it was the best thing that ever happened to them. But when they were going through chemotherapy, or losing their hair, or vomiting, they would not have said that. So very often in the situation when we lose a job, or we're declared bankrupt, or we get ill, it's difficult in the midst to appraise whether it is good or bad. To trust it as leading to something that is for our own evolution. The truth is that we don't know and by attaching these labels of good or bad, by deciding ahead of the event whether it's going to be supportive or not, immediately puts us in the case of a victim. "I'm going to lose my job, why did it have to happen to me?" "I've got to move to a new house, why did that have to happen to me?" Instead of asking the different, more empowering question: "what if this is here to support me?" "What if by losing this job something much better came along?"

Q: Is what you are saying that when you go through that acceptance or non-attachment to any situation things will just naturally be easier? That they will not happen as badly as you are imagining it in the moment?

Yes. But we all know what survival mode feels like. In survival mode it is almost impossible to practise what I'm suggesting, because in survival mode - which is a biological and natural phenomenon – we are in fight or flight. We need to survive, so we either need to run away or we need to fight. But if we lose a job or not, it's not actually a survival case, even if we can't support our family. But what if something better came along that paid us more money? We have to, in a way, get ourselves out of that fight or flight dynamic, and to sit back and realise that we're going to be okay whatever happens.

Just bringing some awareness to how we close down opportunities very quickly and decide based on our old patterns whether something is destructive or good or bad is helpful. A lot of the time when we decide it is not good for us, this is our biased, ultimately delusional view of what has happened.

Q: What would your advice be on how we can influence or encourage the people around us if they are not taking responsibility?

It's not our responsibility to influence anyone. We get caught up in thinking that other people should change, evolve. The only thing we can do is lead by example. The best way to parent is to model authenticity. If we can be honest and say: "I'm struggling with this", or "initially, I thought this was going to be harmful to me but actually I see that it's fantastic that it's happened." And the more we share our truth, without expecting or wanting them to buy into it, then it is fine. When there is an attachment to them changing or an energy that we want to change anyone it becomes a little bit like an evangelical religion where we think we know what is best for them. We don't.

Q: Andrew, why is trust so hard? How can you help us experience life with more trust?

It is difficult because a lot of us have had millions of experiences, particularly early on in our lives, where we trusted and that trust was unfounded. Parents let us down, school lets us down, friends let us down - most of us have experienced that horrible feeling in the pit of our stomach when we really trusted something and they pulled the rug out from under us. It is understandable when we come with these patterns, that it feels like life cannot be trusted. Then it takes a little bit of time and a little bit of evidence to turn that around. So, the first thing is, if we have a pattern, or a samskara, that people cannot be trusted, or that life cannot be trusted, what happens is we surround ourselves with people who are untrustworthy. We tend to create and recreate situations where people or life are untrustworthy. And the reason that we do that is to reinforce the original experience.

So, the first way to change it is to ask the question: "why have I created this situation where people keep letting me down? How is that supporting my growth?" And the reason is there's something in me that is drawn to, or attracts that, and how do I attract something different? The moment we ask that question, we start to bring awareness and we can change it. We take responsibility for attracting untrustworthy people and begin to attract trustworthy people, healing some old wounds along the way. The answer is to learn to change that pattern, to evolve beyond that pattern so you end up in a relationship to someone who is faithful to you.

Q: I do not blame the others anymore, but the problem is that I blame myself.

Again, this is a dead end. All of us understand and have experience of an inner critic or someone that blames ourselves. It's really on the same spectrum; we either blame outwards, which is linked to the fight or flight, or we blame ourselves and blame inwards. Both of them are pointless. Blaming ourselves does not get us anywhere. It doesn't support us, it doesn't help us to evolve, it is just destructive in the same way of blaming someone else. One of the consequences of blaming ourselves is that we stay in a victim mode, because although it is not someone else doing it to us, we are beating ourselves up all the time. We are both abuser and victim at the same time. It keeps us stuck in that dynamic. It keeps us small rather than evolving.

Q: Is it true that it all comes back to saying your truth as well? To be able to express it without feeling worried about being judged or disliked?

Absolutely. I am sure we have all had experiences where friends have gone off and done a workshop and returned all excited and evangelical, trying to get all their family to do it. This is counter-productive. Yes, it was great for them but actually it might not be the right approach for someone else. We are trying to be well meaning and to help everyone else, but actually it's counter-productive because other people create a defence to it.

Q: How do we help the young who feel that the Government and the virus are to blame for the current situation? In so many cases it is desperate, they do not have the experience or wisdom to know that this part of their journey and that losing their job or income is no one's fault.

It's a great question and the answer is that it's not easy, but the guidelines or the principles are the same. In some areas very young people understand this better than adults. But in this situation, it is difficult for them. The first thing is to allow people to be sad, to be upset, to be angry. All of that is fine, but there is a point at which you can ask the question: "How can I use this to support my education, my evolution? How can I grow through this?" It is just an intelligent question because if a young person spends the next

12 months complaining about it, we know that it's a dead end. I would try to distinguish between being upset which is fine, or being sad or angry, which is fine, to then getting into a repetitive pattern of complaining.

As a culture we are slightly obsessed with and very compulsive about complaining about everything. As we know, this does not get us anywhere. So even young people, if they miss out on university or they miss out on experience can be upset about it, but then say how can I harness this to support my evolution? In some ways people sometimes talk about "how can I take a negative and transform it into a positive?" I am not really talking about this because what I am saying is that it was never a negative. It upsets me because it's not what I wanted. Something's happened and it's not what I want.

Take an active alcoholic of 20 years - they stop drinking, they start again, they stop and then they might go on a 3-day bender when they then cause absolute havoc, upset all their loved ones, etc. If that is the last drink they ever take, if after that bender they have 20 years of sobriety it was the best drink they ever had. Yet it caused real upset and heartbreak at the time. It is the same with what is happening right now, whether it is Covid or the reaction to Covid, it is causing a lot of stress, heartbreak, anger and frustration. But if this results in us taking a different pathway, or in us living in our communities in a different way, we will look back and say, "Thank God that happened." "Thank God that something came along to get us to change" because we know, just like the active alcoholic, that the way we have been living is just not sustainable. We know it is destructive and yet we don't do anything about it.

Q: *If someone is mean to you, a family member, is it best to ignore them?*

I don't think ignoring them is necessarily the best way because if someone is being mean to you and you ignore them, normally they need to be mean at another level and it keeps going on. If someone is mean to me, if I am in my centre then the experience or the question arises that they are obviously hurting in some way because they are lashing out at me. It's nothing to do with me. It is them; they are in discomfort; they are unhappy in some way. It's really about engaging with them or exploring. If it hurts you say "that really hurt me, that upset me. What's happening with you? Did you want to hurt me?" Very often we say something mean to someone else to get their attention. I think ignoring is unhelpful, but engaging can be productive.

In any intimate relationship, whether it is a partner, a lover or spouse, or children, when we are angry with people it is almost never about that person. It is what I was saying earlier; we have been triggered in one of our old patterns and we are then mean to, or dump it on someone around us. So when the process is over, one of the things that Anna and I have become very good at, but we used to be terrible at, is that we apologise and say; "I am so sorry, I dumped on you, it had nothing to do with you, this is where I was

triggered." Again, it is about taking responsibility, and children can do this too as it is great for children to learn this.

We are all in the same boat, we are all struggling, there is no holiday, there is no outlet. The Universe has brought us all together into these tense family situations and of course, all the old stuff comes up. You can look at that and think "that's terrible", or "that's bad." Or you can look at it and think "that's great. It's coming up for healing." All these old patterns, individually and collectively, are coming up so we can move through them. The old way is to suppress them or try to get rid of them which doesn't work. The answer is to take radical responsibility for our reactions and behaviour which is liberating and empowering.