

# Global citizen

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By Hyon O'Brien

Fifty years ago, on May 1, 1970, I became an American citizen in a ceremony in Washington D.C. It was a somber moment for me. It dawned on me that I had a responsibility to my adopted country as well as to my beloved Korea.

Fifty years later, I ponder whether I have been a good citizen. And what are the qualities that define a good citizen?

Are we law-abiding?

During this coronavirus pandemic period, we are subject to many emergency orders. Social distancing and wearing masks are among the most urgent. However, about half of the people I see while I am out walking do not comply with these vital measures to prevent the spread of the deadly virus. We know we are in this together. We know total cooperation is needed for it to be successful. I am quite shocked by the nonchalant attitudes of those who disregard the rules.

Do we pay our fair share of taxes?

It grieves me to know that rich people shamelessly open off-shore accounts to avoid taxes at home. Many people seek loopholes to avoid taxes and some shops cheat on sales taxes by reporting less than they collected from customers. Shirking taxes is freeloading on society. We should be happy to pay our fair share.

Are we protecting the environment from climate change?

Do we know how to recycle and reuse to avoid polluting the water and land? Are we practicing every day our share to lessen the impact we humans have on the environment? Why not use mugs instead of plastic or paper cups? Why not bring bags to the supermarkets to avoid using plastic bags? Why is it so difficult to walk or use public transportation whenever possible instead of driving your cars? I have a weekly ceramics group and some of the participants drive to the studio even though they live only a few blocks away. Little things add up.

Are we conscious of the poverty of our neighbors near and far?

For the past 10 years of living in Miami Beach, I have been involved in helping out with a homeless shelter for battered women and their children. I know my help is not enough, but every penny makes a difference. We still continue to support the homeless shelter that my sister is running in Seoul. We used to eat lunch with the homeless people at the shelter most Sundays. Sometimes I was recruited to give sermons (desperate measures for desperate times). In Hong Kong, I extended my hand to help out in the outreach ministry of an Indian missionary couple working with illegal immigrants from Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. Some of my friends from the Union Church are still faithfully serving their needs.

Are we helping to educate those who are eager to study but too poor to attend schools?

As many readers may know, for years I have belonged to the Philanthropic Educational Organization sisterhood (called P.E.O.) that was founded 151 years ago by seven women in Iowa with the motto, "Women empowering other women with education." Now we have nearly a quarter million women members in the U.S.A. and Canada. According to its annual report, the P.E.O. has educated more than 100,000 women so far.

Are we participating in the political process for the good of the country?

As justice-oriented citizens we need to critically assess social, political, and economic structures to make a better society. We need to help reduce inequality, protect the environment, and install a better, more inclusive health care system, by actively working to elect good leadership to enact reforming legislation.

How can we be good global citizens?

In times of stress or crisis like the coronavirus pandemic (globally as of May 10, over four million cases and almost 300,000 deaths), we have a natural tendency to look inward. We look to protect our family, and then our town or city, and then our country.

But the pandemic is by its very nature showing us that, with few exceptions, no country is an island. It is self-defeating for any country to try to close itself off and think only of itself in the face of a problem that affects us all. Problems there become problems here. The countries of the world need to find ways to cooperate. I was heartened to read that in mid-April Korea sent 750,000 coronavirus test kits to the U.S.

And this is not just an issue in dealing with COVID-19, which we can hope and expect will be under control within a couple of years. We also have the even bigger, if slower, threats of climate change and ocean pollution, which will be with us for decades if not centuries.

In our human history, there will continue to come times when we must abandon the idea of "my country" to do the right thing for humanity. May we have a clear discernment as to what those occasions are, and may we have the courage to step out and act!

Stay healthy and safe, dear readers. May this long pandemic's isolation time be used by each one of us to reflect and become stronger, better, more loving citizens of the world we all live in!

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