Universe of Obligation

Democracy is becoming rather than being. It can easily be lost, but never is fully won. Its essence is eternal struggle.

- William H. Hastie

Chapter 1 (in Holocaust and Human Behavior) focused on factors that shape an individual’s identity. It also described how those factors are sometimes used to exclude people from membership in various groups. Chapter 2 considers the ways a nation’s identity is defined. That definition has enormous significance. It indicates who holds power in the nation. And it determines who is a part of its ‘universe of obligation’—the name Helen Fein has given to the circle of individuals and groups toward whom obligations are owed, to whom rules apply, and whose injuries call for [amends].

For much of world history, birth determined who was a part of a group’s ‘universe of obligation’ and who was not. As Jacob Bronowski once explained, “The distinction [between self and other] emerges in prehistory in hunting cultures, where competition for limited numbers of food sources requires a clear demarcation between your group and the other group, and this is transferred to agricultural communities in the development of history. Historically this distinction becomes a comparative category in which one judges how like us, or unlike us, is the other, thus enabling people symbolically to organize and divide up their worlds and structure reality.”

-Facing History and Ourselves Resource Book: Holocaust and Human Behavior
Universe of Obligation

In Circle 1, write your name.

In Circle 2, write the name of people to whom you feel the greatest obligation—that is, people for whom you'd be willing to take a great risk or put yourself in peril for (you don't have to write actual names.)

In Circle 3, who are the people on the next level? That is people to whom you have some obligation, but not as great as in circle 2.

In Circle 4, who are the people on the next level? People to whom you have some obligation, but not as great as in circle 3.