

# Do the Best You Can

by Bill Herbst

Version 1.4 (posted on 24 December 2019)

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*[This week, I'm presenting two commentaries. They're very similar. In fact, they're nearly identical. Both offer the same general message, but with a slightly different poetic spin. I've placed them back-to-back in this PDF file. If one of them has a title that you like better, read that one. Or, if you have sufficient time and inclination, read both. Your choice.]*

I started a bunch of commentaries over the past week. A couple were harangues and diatribes, a couple others were gentler and more reasonable, but all of them died on the vine after one page or less, killed by the onslaught of *ifs*, *ands*, and *buts* that accompany everything I write, like a weird little pack of dachshunds that love me, follow me around yapping continually, and nip at my heels often.

Sometimes I ignore them and muddle through to the end of a given piece of wordsmithing. Other times they trip me up, so that I have to quit whatever I'm writing to feed or pet them until they quiet down. This week they stopped me in my tracks over and over. I'd think I had something worth saying, start to write it down, get half a page or one page in, and then the pack would overtake me. I've learned to not become upset when this happens, and I accept that there's good reason why they're pulling me away from whatever I'm writing (even if I don't know what that reason is...). These *ifs*, *ands*, and *buts* are part of my own process of investigation and understanding. At the end of the day, they are my friends.

So, what I'm left with this week is this: **Do the best you can.** Not exactly a cosmic revelation or profound truth. Pretty simple, actually. *Just do the best you can.*

What exactly is the best we can do? Well, that varies widely from one person to the next, and even from one moment to the next. I don't presume to know what the best might be for you. The best you can do on Tuesday may not be the best you can do on Wednesday. The best you can do when you're 30 is probably not the best you can do when you're 70. The best you can do at any time might not be the best someone else can do. Other people have different life-journeys than yours or mine, with different challenges, resources, limitations, and other factors shaping their understanding and motivations than ours.

OK, then is nothing universal? No, universals are everywhere. Breathing is universal, as is joy, suffering, and love. But all of these universals come in individually configured packages and forms.

Other people live in universes custom-tailored for them, just like yours is custom-tailored for you. I can't assert that these individualized universes "belong" to us. Maybe we belong to them. At any rate, we're all matched to our respective universes.

Hell, sometimes I'm not sure what the best is for me. But in any given moment, in any particular situation, the best I can do is usually not hidden or in doubt. This is a little like having an inner compass or gyroscope, an invisible device that tells me the difference between up and down, left and right, front and back, past and future. I don't monitor that device constantly. Perhaps that's a confession, but I don't think about doing my best all the time. Much of my time is spent just dutifully taking care of the tasks in front of me, and I don't resent that. I'm not always at a crossroads deciding which way to go. In fact, having made a decision at the last crossroads as to how to be and what to do for the upcoming stretch of the journey, it's actually pleasant to just walk down the road until the next crossroads emerges. I'd guess that many people spend most of their time that way.

As an aside, in addition to an inner compass, I also have a bullshit detector that sounds an alert every time it picks up the telltale scent of a lie, prevarication, half-truth, false narrative, or any of the other forms of non-truth that infest the environment around or inside us. It's a little like a smoke alarm. Unfortunately, my bullshit detector triggers so often these days that now, to maintain some semblance of my sanity, I've had to turn down the volume of the alarm to its lowest setting. I may have to remove the batteries soon...

Anyway, back to the crossroads of decision-making. Sometimes I see the next crossroad from a long ways off and have time to consider what I might do when I reach it — whether to stop, which way to turn, or just go straight ahead. Of course, all that is speculation, mere musing about the future. I don't actually decide until I get to the crossroads.

I don't claim that my inner compass is or ever was infallible, magically insightful, or always correct in its radar. Really, I have no reliable or dependable way to assess that. As I look back on my life and the choices I've made about what to do and how to be, I find occasional examples (too many, actually) of decisions or actions about which I now feel remorse. That is, of course, based on the unintended negative repercussions I caused or suffered. Mostly, however, I can't make a judgment about whether I was right or wrong to do what I did in a given situation. That's not clear even in hindsight, obscured as it is by subtlety, complexity, and the inherent distortions of memory.

Beyond the challenges of determining what's best are the difficulties that surround "doing." Like Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" question, there's also "To do or not to do." In some circumstances, doing *something* is clearly better than doing *nothing*. But not always. At times, the wisest path is to do nothing — to refrain from acting, since anything one does might be both premature and precipitous.

I have friends who seem to me terrific animals. I'm not. The experience of life in material bodies as animals is fascinating to me, but has never felt natural personally. (I'm not implying anything metaphysical here, just admitting that I'm not especially comfortable with physicality.) The friends I refer to love their animal natures. They take to physicality innately and are peachy keen about kinetic activity. They seem to live in the urgency of the moment. Their first, most immediate, and characteristic response to any situation is typically to *do something*. Take action. *Now*. Damn the torpedo's, full speed ahead.

I'm not criticizing my friends here. They are who they are, just as I am who I am. I'm just pointing out that what might *feel* best for them does not always feel best for me. I presume that sometimes they're objectively correct, and I would be wiser to act, even if I'm not entirely comfortable with doing so. Other times, I'm pretty sure that I'm right to caution patience and waiting until a determination of the most karma-free action can be made, thus minimizing the possibility of action-reaction blowback.

I make this point mainly to underscore the bewildering complexity of the kaleidoscopic, interpenetrating swirl of realities, nonrealities, and unrealities that make up the zeitgeist. Opposites don't cancel out; they coexist. Contradictions abound. Damn, life is really complicated, with paradox lurking around every corner. While it's understandable that humans will try to simplify life (to bring it into a more coherent shape and form through storytelling that suits our limited abilities to comprehend anything), we do so at our own risk. *Surprise! Thought you knew something, didn't you?* Well, think again. *(If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him, for he's not the actual Buddha...)*

The upshot for this commentary is that I'm left with very little to say, at least not much that I can stand behind and feel confident about. So, I'll surrender to the most common denominator: *Do the best you can*.

Some might call that a tautology, holding that — by definition — that's what everyone does all the time. Not true in my opinion. I believe that many human beings spend much of their time not thinking about the best they can be or do. Quite likely, some people don't consider it at all. I doubt that's the case with almost anyone who takes the time to read my commentaries, however, so a final question emerges: *If my readers are already doing the best they can, why am I writing this?*

Well, consider it a benediction, rather like cheerleading. Or maybe confirmation and empowerment, however slight. The ship of civilization appears to be headed into some very angry seas, with serious storms ahead, and the people running the ship seem less than fully aware of the dangerous waters we're blithely steaming into. Some of the officers and crew are apparently downright oblivious. For all of us onboard (which is, in fact, ALL of us) thinking straight, maintaining our sanity, and keeping our hearts open are likely to become even more challenging than they have been historically and are now.

Just keep doing the best you can.

# Do the Right thing

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