

# A Good Start

by Bill Herbst

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*[This week's post is related to last week's, not really as a continuation, but more as a slightly different slant on similar themes.]*

The title of this commentary is the punch-line of a well-known old joke:

*Question: "What do you call 5,000 dead lawyers at the bottom of the ocean?"  
Answer: "A good start."*

Rim shot.

Sure, that joke is not what we'd call a particularly thoughtful or nuanced perspective on what we need to do to improve civilization and move humanity forward toward greater peace, love, and joy, but few jokes are. It does, though, reflect a certain raw sentiment that may touch on — however crudely or obliquely — issues of real importance. The rule of law is at the heart of the ideals upon which America was founded. Eternal vigilance is required to keep it from being totally trashed, and lawyers are necessary for that. But lawyers also serve those who mock the rule of law seeking unfair advantage, and resentment about that is understandable. How much more evidence do we need that justice routinely bows before privilege?

The mass protest movement currently underway in America and around the world — call it a revolt, an insurrection, a rebellion, or whatever other easy label you like — has been launched with two goals, both of which are daunting.

The first is to eradicate systemic racism and the white supremacy that amount to America's original sins. Slavery is at the very heart of civilization. I don't care whether we're talking about people on the losing side of wars between early states (the first empires) who were then enslaved and often worked to death as forced labor; the more recent institution of chattel slavery, where some people were seen as less than human and considered property to be bought and sold; or the less obvious wage slavery that arose with the Industrial Revolution and is still with us today as the almost universally-accepted notion of "jobs."

All three are methods to acquire cheap labor, reflecting the Us-versus-Them dynamic of human nature in its economic expression: owners versus workers. Whether that's acceptable depends on one's world-view: for capitalists and many conservatives, it's the natural order of management and labor; for libertarians, it's about agreements and freely-negotiated contracts; for socialists, it's the Haves lording it over the Have-Nots.

Anyway, the first goal of the current revolt is for society to stop treating some human beings as if they're less than human.

The second goal is to end the all-too-common and habitual reliance on force — particularly lethal, deadly force — inflicted by police on certain sectors of the public. Blacks, minorities, and the poor are typically the victims (targets?) of this violence. The larger issue here is the ongoing and increasing militarization of law enforcement, which is a subset of the glorification of the military. America has become the new Sparta.

Of course, America has enjoyed a long and toxic love affair with violence as a sacred dimension of our national mythology: Perpetual wars, gun culture, mass shootings, 2nd Amendment insanity, kill-happy video games, ultra-violent TV shows and movies, and a military budget larger than that of the next ten countries combined on the list of global military spending.

OK, I get it — as a group, adolescent males are testosterone-driven, heat-seeking missiles. They want to explode and blow up something, anything, everything. Sadly, America is like an entire country of 15-year-old boys who never grew up.

Both goals of the protest are positive and worthwhile. Both are motivated by sane and loving impulses. However, I'm not confident (or even optimistic) that either can be achieved.

As I wrote above, racism is deeply embedded in the Us-versus-Them dynamic of our neurobiology. The biological differences between us — as tribes or ethnicities — are puny and primarily cosmetic, but those superficial distinctions are what people notice. Add cultural and historical differences into the mix, and the result is venomous. In too many human hearts, fear of The Other long ago put down deep roots. And with fear comes disdain, hatred, and even murderous impulse. To actually end racism, we have to restore a much larger measure of empathic and sympathetic recognition of our common humanity. Practically, that means altering the proportion of those we consider Us versus those we consider Them, by moving some of Them (as many as possible) into membership with Us. That possibility has little to do with changing people's minds, but a great deal to do with opening their hearts.

Achieving that is, in my opinion, simply beyond our current capabilities. The most we can hope for realistically, I think, given where we are, is to make some tenuous progress toward reducing the social acceptability of such categorically habitual repugnant feelings, which may then reduce the range of acceptable racist behavior. Lots of people will still harbor terrible, hateful feelings about other races and creeds, but they might think twice about expressing such feelings or acting on them.

The situation with violence is similar. As a species, we are both cooperative and competitive, agreeable and contentious. Yes, we are capable of profound love and tender kindness, but we are equally inclined toward unspeakable cruelty and unlimited savagery. We can't simply root out aggression from the human psyche. The most we can hope to achieve via protest and reform is to constrain it by limiting the social acceptability of such brutality.

Even if we manage to curb the violence of police, we are still subject to the culture's (and the Empire's) gung-ho military mind-set. Defunding the institution of law enforcement in favor of investing in more peaceful methods of social safety and control is a good idea. Period. No ifs, ands, or buts. In addition, through, how about defunding the military in favor of investing in a saner society and a better world? Conservatives, obsessed as they are with security for and protection of the Haves, will never go for that. Hell, even liberals thank soldiers for their service. Where is the groundswell of public outrage about the military-industrial-commercial complex that President Eisenhower warned us about 60 years ago? So far, that impulse remains on the fringes of our society. Both the elites who rule and the majority of the population are unhesitating in their love of the military.

No, we're a long, long way from limiting violence in this country.

Personally, I'd add late-stage, predatory capitalism to the ruinous factors working against us. If we really want to move away from racism and violence, and if we are to have even the slightest chance of civilization (and quite possibly our species itself) persevering through the inevitable onslaught of the various horsemen of the apocalypse, we'll have to change our entire approach to business, economics, and the extreme imbalances of wealth inequality that hold America in their death grip. Nothing short of radical change will suffice to save us. Just tinkering around the edges with our economic and financial systems won't cut it.

We don't have a clue about how to do this, in part because we've not seriously considered it yet. Any debate about the merits of capitalism versus socialism is still conducted in only the most ridiculous and false terms. But I think we'll be

forced to try to find a better way to do business than the current approach, almost certainly motivated by mass suffering that cannot be ignored.

Anyone who talks about “sustainability” is about 40 years behind the times. We had our chance to do that, didn’t choose it, and now that window has closed. It’s simply too late. The economics of consumption is a suicide pact. At this point, although still limited to the cutting edge of thoughtful environmental science, the discussion is rapidly turning away from sustainability toward “resilience,” which is a polite term for managing some semblance of survival in the face of truly unimaginable calamity.

Sounds awful, doesn’t it? And yet, I believe that where we are now — despite the seemingly overwhelming insanity of these times — is probably as reasonable a beginning as we can create.

Do I feel that the glass is half-full? Nope, not even close. It’s way worse than half-empty. But something different is afoot finally. Something we didn’t expect that is arising out of many people — tens of millions of us. All the fools and fantasists and those suffering from various other derangements will do their damndest to pull the rug out from under this welling-up of sanity. Deep-state conspiracies promoted from the left and perversions of “freedom” pushed by the white supremacists on the right seek to undermine the authenticity of the protest and and take the wind out of its sails. I’m in no position to judge for everyone else what’s true and what’s not, what to embrace and what to reject, but I would strongly suggest that protecting and maintaining our sanity is paramount. Compassion for the most damaged among us must not mean doubting ourselves. We’re going to need all the resolve, gumption, and fortitude we can muster.

I hold out no hope for things really getting better any time soon. But still — and in spite of everything — I regard the current uprising as a pretty good start.