

Acceptance or Change

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Faced with situations that bring trouble or pain, we have two strategic choices: acceptance or change. Those are not the only choices, of course. We can bitch and moan, for instance, but those responses don't really address the situation. In other words, they're not *strategies* — they're *tactics* for temporary venting of frustration. Strategically, the options boil down to a binary choice: Either try to accept the situation or try to change it. Both paths require planning and sustained effort, and each strategy may prove successful or not (for any combination of reasons).

In the "To Be or Not to Be" soliloquy from his play *Hamlet*, Shakespeare refers to this choice:

*To be or not to be: that is the question.
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by thus opposing, end them.*

Most analyses of this famous soliloquy (and there are many) focus on issues surrounding death — and rightly so. As the protagonist, Hamlet is tormented throughout the play by anxieties about his continued existence. Thus, the first statement of the soliloquy — "*To be or not to be: that is the question.*"

The second sentence, however, is a wonderful poetic statement about the two strategic choices. Are we morally better off choosing the effort of acceptance (by suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune) or the effort of change (by taking arms against a sea of troubles)? The choice is ours to make.

In essence, both strategies are about change. In the first (acceptance), we try to change ourselves through surrender to the status quo. In the other, we try to change the external situation to improve it more to our liking.

On the one hand, this is a simple (some would say simplistically dualistic) choice: Either one, but not both. One road or the other. In reality, though, many such difficult situations of suffering are so complex and longstanding that we are quite likely to alternate between the two strategies. We might attempt to surrender to our suffering at first and maintain that effort for awhile, but then later try to change the situation to relieve or remove the suffering. Or vice versa.

Over time that alternation between internal acceptance or external change may repeat again and again, since whatever strategy we choose might not result in an effective, satisfying, or permanent outcome. Acceptance is not always possible, and attempting to change doesn't always succeed to alter the situation and remove the source of our suffering. Even while we attempt one, we may consider shifting to the other. In the real (i.e. practical) world, in any difficult situation involving important factors or serious repercussions, it's rare that a single, one-time strategic decision is sufficient to provide the desired end.

Two major developments have taken shape in America and around the world over the past months. One is the Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic, with all its dreadful repercussions in health, economics, politics, and culture. The other, which is unfolding simultaneously, is a widespread protest movement about racism and equal treatment under the law.

Nobody asked for the first development, although the pandemic was made possible, and pretty much inevitable, by modern civilization. [Global pandemics did not occur during the long hunter-gatherer-horticulturalist phase of human social evolution, where our relative isolation in small kinship bands limited the spread of disease. A particular local group could suffer devastation from viral infection or other disasters, but the human species as a whole was effectively shielded against such calamities. In modern civilization, however, disease pandemics are unavoidable, however sporadic they may be.]

We chose the second development, however. This renewed and focused civil rights movement began as a rising up of passion for active change after an extended period of unsuccessful acceptance. The circumstances that provoked the upwelling of righteous outrage and intense anger in a broad rebellion of public protest were, of course, the recurring incidence of violence suffered by black people at the hands of police. Such tragedies are nothing new in America. They've happened all too frequently throughout the arc of American history. But social media and online video provided the spark that ignited the current blaze. Videos of the event went viral, paralleling the onset of COVID-19, although the "infection" took root in hearts and minds rather than the Coronavirus' arena of physical bodies.

I think a good case can be made that the second development (the protests) might not have happened without the first (the pandemic). We're moving through a time of intertwined and cascading crises, where one disruption spawns or is followed by another. And we're only at the beginning of this period, with many more crises to come over the years ahead.

The specific trigger that provoked the protests was the death of a black man in Minneapolis caused by police officers who had arrested him for a minor allegation. Many similarly horrific incidents have occurred in recent years, but the visual recordings from onlookers' smart phones of George Floyd's death were

the tipping points that achieved critical mass for a large segment of the public. That incident unleashed a revolt about general attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward minorities in America that have been ongoing since before the country was founded and continues to reach into nearly every aspect of American life. Namely, that people of color are somehow less human than whites. Thus, *Black Lives Matter* is both the official name of the seminal activist organization started in 2013 that underlies the protests and the prevailing slogan of the movement.

Despite literally centuries of trouble, conflict, and suffering (not to mention hatred and violence), neither acceptance nor change has worked to end the fundamental discord around racism. And both strategies have been tried repeatedly. Minorities have been pushed down and held up (not by the same people, of course). Innumerable laws have been passed in both directions — toward prevention and perpetuation. Nothing has worked to permanently resolve the conflict either way. Within the mainstream American psyche, minorities in general and blacks in particular have remained the dangerous, inferior, and undeserving Other, on the one hand, and the aggrieved victims on the other. In the crudest expression of the Us-versus-Them dynamic, the darkest-skinned people among us have been historically considered to be Them, not Us, and they are still regarded as Them by a large segment of the white population.

For many people (how many exactly I don't know, but I suspect that the number is huge), this is not only the existing state of affairs, but the normal and correct condition within human life. For them, neither acceptance nor change is relevant. For those of us who are troubled by racism, we have to decide where we stand. Do we accept the way things are, or do we commit to changing current conditions? A few people make one choice and stick with it consistently for a lifetime. Congressman John Lewis has been posthumously eulogized over the past week for his life-long consistency in promoting equality through non-violence, but the other side has its avatars too. The vast majority of us don't demonstrate such staunch determination. Our commitment to a strategy is fluid and changes based on variables of time and circumstance.

Although we're only in the first year of the 2020s, my sense of this entire decade — astrologically and otherwise — is that acceptance gets us nowhere. Surrender to past expectations, either passively or actively, is a losing strategy that leads to greater suffering and probable catastrophe. Commitment to change — at the obvious levels we are aware of today, and at others we can hardly yet imagine — is the only viable option to create a future worth having.

Finding our way through the crises, chaos, and breakdowns that lay ahead will not be easy. But we have passed beyond the time where we had a choice.

Now we will be forced.