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Responding to Injustice

Being a white, straight, middle class, American male in the 21st century, I can pretty safely say I haven’t been exposed to many of the injustices of the world firsthand. The world has not put unfair expectations on me, I have been given license to go and do most things I have wanted to do with little opposition, and in general I have few issues with how society treats me overall. I have witnessed injustice, in the forms of sexism, racism, and classism, but have done little to help or change these things. As it stands, the only thing I can change is myself. I have made it a goal of mine to judge someone only based on their abilities and their eagerness to learn, not on their gender, race, or background. Doing so has made me many unexpected friends, whom I am very grateful for. I also have experience with people who have disabilities; my brother Paul is severely autistic, and goes to a special school. Even though he attends a special needs school he does not fall under the school’s norm; most learning techniques they have developed for the, admittedly paradoxically “normal” special needs children, do not work well with him. It has been a struggle to make his school understand how to help him effectively, though my family and I continue to fight and have been succeeding as of late. I also have a disability, though it is incredibly miniscule, if not entirely irrelevant, when compared to my brother’s: I was born with protanomaly, also known as red-color deficiency. My color identification is skewed, if not completely incorrect at times. I have come to live with it, but it prevents me from doing certain things other people do easily. The unfair times of my life have changed who I am as a person, and have taught me that there are multiple ways to handle unpleasant situations, depending on who you have on your side.

From day to day I try to stay optimistic about my life, while still remaining logical and grounded. Even when things look bleak or a situation has become very tense, I try to remain positive. An unfortunate consequence of this is that I shy away from conflict between myself and others; I try my best to please everyone, and failing to do so is upsetting. It’s hard to stay logical and optimistic when I don’t understand the problem I am having with other people. My typical approach, though it isn’t exactly optimal, is to wait until the issue cannot be put off any longer, then approach it and take it as lightly as I can. My methodology can me contrasted with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s, as described in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail.* King puts great focus on the how waiting to act is akin to never acting at all, and writes that he and his brothers had waited far too long to not act. While my issues don’t compare, my ideology seems to directly contrast King’s: I wait until I absolutely cannot wait any more to face a problem, then take it on. However, when I face it, I take it lightly and try to avoid instigating more conflict if at all possible, while he advocates tackling issues immediately and with confidence.

My attitude towards conflict has caused me issues in the past, though things tend to work out nicely. During my sophomore year of high school, I was asked to create an art project based on a Spanish painter. I chose Picasso, and opted to emulate a very crude drawing of flowers he had made. Being color blind, I have had success in the past with asking to make pencil sketches or otherwise uncolored art projects; people tend to understand that color blindness is a pretty big problem. I asked my teacher if I could make a sketch of the work of art, and she told me I could not. Not wanting to instigate conflict, I simply nodded my head and went home to do my project. The only art supplies I had were unlabeled colored pencils, and I was too stubborn and too impatient to sit with somebody else and have them explain which colors were which to me, so I just went for it. Bringing it into school the next day, my friends confirmed that, yes, I had gotten colors wrong. I waited until the last minute – when I actually turned in the project – to see if this would cause an issue. This could have possibly been disastrous, but ended up being fine. My teacher looked past the color issues and graded me based on everything else. While it isn’t a great moral for a story, simply acting through the problem and waiting to see the outcome helped me prevent a conflict from arising; the outcome could have been very different if I had tried to argue my point earlier on.

In *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau writes “…shall we be content to obey [unjust laws], or shall we endeavor to amend them and obey until them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?” (Jacobus 311) I believe he means that it is wrong to obey rules we believe are unjust, and should either fight to change them or simply disobey them outright. I have run into this issue when talking with my parents and with my brother’s teachers at his school. My brother does not do well under the “normal” procedures of the classes at his school. He needs individualized attention and does not learn in the same way many of the other special needs kids do. It has taken us many years to convey this truth to my brother’s school, and only very recently have we had any notable improvement. He now gets more attention and is using altered methods developed by us with his therapists and has been improving at a much better rate than he had been previously. This entire experience taught me that I am more bold when arguing a point if I am backed by other people, like my friends or my family. By fighting to amend and change rules, we made my brother’s quality of education significantly better, similar to what Thoreau advocates.

Everyone responds to different issues in different ways; I handle problems differently on my own than I would if I was backed up by my family or my friends. On my own, I go against both Thoreau’s and King’s writings, waiting until the last minute to confront issues and fighting them as little as possible. When backed by others, like my family with regard to my brother, I can become much more confident, and advocate for changes I believe to be necessary and just. I know I still have room to improve my methods, but I believe I have learned many lessons and have already become a better person for having had to deal with the injustices I have encountered in my own life.

Works Cited

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