

Obligatory Apathy

by Tamara Pearson via jane - Resistance Words *Saturday, Mar 16 2019, 7:22pm*

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We live in a society that despises any sign of caring about just how bad things are for most people. The planet is corroding and smoldering, and time and resources are going into nuclear weapons and sending humanity into its own carefully prepared hell. The unequal global economy is efficiently stimulating the starvation and hunger of 815 million people, and the Internet is a plutocracy where money buys the biggest microphones. The thriving communities of Syria and Yemen are being turned to moonscape, while corporate corruption and consumerism are being cultivated instead of culture. We continue to build a hierarchy of human worth that relegates certain classes, ages, genders, sexualities, and races to shit status, and while millions of refugees are being put On Hold for ever in camps. But society is collectively rejecting even the mention of politics and having an opinion.

People are making the choice to ignore hell, and that is a choice to do nothing. The business-as-usual mentality of society as a whole is one where we believe that accommodating ourselves to the rife injustice is a way to look after ourselves. But in-fact, adjusting to abuse (against yourself or others) is unhealthy for both society and individuals. A healthy culture isn't one that basks in ignorance and selfishness, that glorifies those who avoid taking a stand (calling such cowardliness "neutrality"), and fosters the gaping black-hole of absence of life as though lack of feeling were a metric of high social standards. Rather, a healthy culture names, remembers, and calls out injustice, and celebrates informed participation in social decision making.

Contributing factors to a collective ignoring of hell

In my city of Puebla, Mexico last year, there was a major earthquake that saw hundreds killed and thousands left homeless. For months, people here collected food and building material donations and traveled to remote areas, helping to rebuild. Financial donations came in from around the world. Why isn't there the same sense of urgency and commitment to combating poverty?

1) Those who have power are taking the lead in doing nothing

It's easy to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people to a sports stadium and wherever personal gain is involved, but we struggle to unite to make the necessary changes to the world so that it can provide the basics to everyone. World "leaders" have met repeatedly to discuss climate goals, but failed to do anything. A big part of that is that the people who have economic and political power are governing for themselves and their fellow elites, rather than for humanity, and refuse to take any sort of a lead in anything.

2) The world is someone else's responsibility

And while the leaders are inactive, so are the rest of us. The daunting abyss between what is wrong with the world and what we think we are able to do about it, is a result of the economic and political elites not allowing even measly scraps of power to trickle down to the rest. Encumbered with resignation, defeat, and impotency, we put up with things when we believe that something better

isn't possible and that we are powerless.

At the same time, the prevailing mentality is that the world is there to be used (take its energy, wood, minerals and metals) but that we don't owe it or anyone anything. The culture of "it's not my business" and "each to his/her own" negates the idea that the world is in fact our business and we should have a reciprocal relationship with both the planet and with the people who help provide us with a home and a life. Instead, there's a sense of entitlement, especially in "first world" (ie wealthy) countries.

3) Suffering has been normalized

Inequality, poverty, abuse of the planet's resources and more have become "natural" phenomenon. Unlike an earthquake which surprises unlucky victims and is framed as a tragedy by the media, the poverty of billions of people is not a tragedy - instead, it is seen as something that is basically deserved and normal. Ironically, it is earthquakes that are natural and there is little we can do about them, whereas inequality is not natural. It is a conscious policy.

4) Racism and classism mean we don't care about most people

The media and the world get hooked on events like the Spanish terror attacks in which 13 people died, but are utterly bored by the humanitarian crisis in Sudan, with 2 million refugees. That is an indication of a profound and unacknowledged racism, and one that enables such atrocities to occur in the first place. Likewise, a person's poverty level is an easy yardstick of how much degradation and violence against them we tolerate.

5) The bystander effect: indifference is self-perpetuating

Most people don't feel looked after by their community, their schools, their government, and even healthcare providers, so why should they care back? People see that everyone else is littering, so they litter as well - what's the point in being the only one who doesn't? Likewise, people see that no one does anything about the latest injustice, and so they don't either. This is often referred to as the bystander phenomenon. After an injustice, sociology professor Wesley Perkins explains, "people think everybody is mean and cruel-hearted" but much of it occurs because people assume that if no one does anything, then there mustn't be a problem.

"Most of us do the right thing only when others are doing the right thing. Real heroes are the ones who break out of the group norm. The predominant cultural impulse is for people to transfer responsibility," argued Paul Ragat Loeb, author of *Soul of a Citizen*. Basically, if no one acts, then no one acts - and the more people actively doing nothing, the stronger the compulsion is to join in with them. The hopeful element to this cause of apathy is that a small act or a voice of dissent can ruin the effect.

6) The numbers can be overwhelming

"Psychic numbing" and "compassion fade" often occur when tragedies involve large numbers of people, according to psychologist Paul Slovic. We feel more emotionally compelled to help individuals with stories, he says, as they are expressed at a "scale we can understand and connect to," but our response to major crises is inhibited. Two key factors contribute to this: a loss of sensitivity the more people are involved, and a false sense of efficacy. That is, we're able to see the impact we have when we help an individual, but when we contribute in a small way in tackling the roots of poverty, which affects millions, we're more conscious of how much we're *not* helping.

7) There's a lack of critical thought and knowledge

A healthy society isn't one that tolerates people expressing an opinion, it's one that encourages and thrives on that by teaching critical thought and consistently giving children through to adults all the tools and information necessary to be able to navigate current events and participate in a full way in society. Instead, most of us leave high school having memorized the periodic table, but with no clue about the origins of injustices nor what we can do about them. This intentional political illiteracy is marginalizing and undemocratic, relegating most of us to watching, unamused, as the world falls apart, and unable to wrap our heads around it all.

8) We're taught to be fatalistic

Encouraged by ignorance, religion (usually), and political leaders who don't lead or act, a prevailing cultural belief that whatever happens is inevitable and the future is out of our hands eliminates any sense of responsibility or need to analyze.

The dangers and consequences of wilfully ignoring hell

Political illiteracy, ignorance, lacking a sense of belonging to the world, and the severe absence of solidarity are dangerous both to those directly affected by tragedies, violence, climate change, famine, and abuse, as well as to those who aren't. Here are some of the key consequences of collective apathy:

1) Doing nothing

The biggest, most obvious consequence is that nothing is being done about problems that are easily resolved. The world's 2,043 billionaires have a combined wealth of US\$5.4 trillion- enough to end extreme poverty seven times over. The money and resources are there to end hunger, cure or prevent many illnesses, set up solar and other renewable energies to replace most contaminating energy forms, build housing, and more.

2) The powerful can do what they like

Political apathy facilitates the corruption that lead to it in the first place, allowing those with economic and political power to get away with atrocities and lazy incompetence.

3) Setting a low bar

The more apathetic and passive society is, the lower the bar for what is tolerable is set. At the moment, we tolerate our supposed representatives lying to us, we tolerate a press controlled by commercial interests, we tolerate resources going into the creation of a serious nuclear threat while universal healthcare is apparently too hard, and so on. We're tolerating extreme maltreatment of refugees in Australia and bombing in the Middle East: it's hard to imagine the bar getting much lower. What goes unchallenged becomes the norm, and what society considers "normal" is in turn a reflection of the health of that society (rather than the mental healthy of individuals being at all related to their level of deviation from the norm). A society that grumbles "stop being so negative" when an individual dares to note injustice, has low standards for what its people should be entitled to.

4) Apathy and inaction actually makes you feel worse

Many people tell themselves that they ignore what is going on in the world in order to protect themselves from it. Yet the suffering is so tangible, even avoiding the headlines, we can't avoid the homelessness, racism, sexism, or economic hardship. So when we do nothing about the in-your-face problems, instead of feeling stress and concern about these things, we choose an attitude that is detached and unresponsive – which leads instead to feelings of alienation, bitterness, de-motivation and narcissism. Many people say that following the news is “too much.” But while taking a break is understandable, desensitizing as a permanent, all-the-time strategy doesn't work. Losing our own humanity and our sense of place in the world is harmful to ourselves as much as to others. As author Margaret Heffernan put it, “We make ourselves powerless when we pretend we don't know. That's the paradox of blindness: We think it will make us safe even as it puts us in danger.”

5) The absence of global and local community

Ignoring the world means not being part of humanity and the global community. The pervasiveness of indifference means that we have to live in an uncaring, hostile world where being sick is stressful because we aren't confident we'll be looked after, bus drivers can't be bothered to stop for passengers, people don't give up their seat for those who need one more, and society can feel like an angry, aggressive, unsupportive experience. Indifference in others discourages motivation and goal pursuit in those facing that indifference.

6) Dehumanization isn't just a cause, but also a consequence of apathy

When people ignore injustice they make an active choice to turn off empathy, with the consequence of activating disgust – there is no non-emotion, no neutral ground when it comes to being unempathetic. Decommissioning one's moral sentiments in of itself is dehumanizing.

7) A mentally weak society

We know that it isn't beneficial to an individual's mental health for them to ignore a problem in the long term, and the same applies to society's mental health. Collectively, humanity is not very mentally strong – we lack determination, solidarity, empathy, and we're submissive. While, on the other hand, I'm continuously moved by the strength and minds of individuals who manage to be incredible despite everything, as a collective force, humanity needs to value selfless behavior more. Further, “avoiding mental discomfort at any cost can be a self-defeating strategy,” according to Joanna Cheek, clinical assistant professor of psychiatry.

8) A meaningless life

A culture of indifference makes for boring conversations, a life lacking in meaning, and a suffocating lack of agency. It's a stark contrast to my many years in politically-vibrant Venezuela, where there was always something to debate with one's neighbor, the bus driver, and the arepa seller. Your mind had so many things to turn over, there was never a dull moment, and there were more projects to do and things to attempt than you could handle. Learning and growth – individually and collectively, was constant. Apathy, on the other hand, is a numbness that can go unnoticed until you lose it, as well as being an attitude – a way of life, that is uncreative and tedious.

9) Going through life without hope

We need hope to keep us moving and active. A culture that ignores the suffering of others fosters a feeling that change is impossible, and we go through life embodying that sense of hopelessness.

Doing something about globalized inaction

What if ignoring the world's problems was the most morally fucked thing a person could do? Would you take two weeks to get politically literate? What does it take to empower people to be part of the solution, rather than through their passivity, being part of the problem?

A starting point is to stop insisting that politics be kept out of everything. Injustices and politics weaves its way into our every thread of being – it's in the soccer game (look at the advertising, look at the gender roles, look at the distribution of money and resources and who makes those decisions), it's in the shops (who made the clothing and under what conditions, who allocated the land to be used for consumerism rather than health or education). The politics is there, and ignoring it or telling those who don't to shut up doesn't make it go away, it just turns you into a willful accomplice of the crimes.

Speaking out lets others know that they can speak out too – it triggers action. Supporting alternative journalism is a way of supporting more organized attempts to break the silence. And reading or listening to reliable, non-corporate, non-US-centric world news on a regular basis is a basic responsibility that all members of the global community have. Talking to others about what you hear then counters the apathy. Standing up to racism, sexist jokes, and other forms of ritualized abuse within our daily interactions is also important and de-normalizes such a culture of disrespect.

Get involved in action, movements, and rallies and do what you can in your context. Put politics (ie fighting injustice) on the agenda in your community or home or workplace. Caring about the world needs to be a natural, integral part of living. This shit is urgent. There's an earthquake happening right now, all the time – treat it with that urgency and value others who are already doing so.

[The world is as it is due to y/our collective behaviour, if we change that behaviour we change the world.]

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