

## To Change Or Not To Change

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*Maya Strausberg's leaving the Herald reminds me of this column I wrote in 2001 about change. At the time a friend asked me if I had been high when writing it. He didn't say high on what, but if he meant high on the possibility of an ever-changing life until the day of death, then I surely was flying sky high.*

To change or not to change? That is the question.

Hamlet said it differently, consumed as he was by his uncle's murder of his father and subsequent quick marriage to his mother. Thank goodness most of us are not cast out on Freudian fields of such epic proportions that suicide becomes a viable option. The slings and arrows of our outrageous fortune frequently play out on more pedestrian plains, pitting job change against perseverance, divorce against reconciliation, estrangement against understanding, passivity against action.

But change we must, as mortality dictates, no matter how much we desire status in quo.

And change we desire, though sometimes vicariously when, tired in the evening after a long workday, kids in bed, brains on idle, we sit in front of the TV at night, watching others lead lives of change clocked by commercials. Or we watch movies that transform a mundane room into a make-believe world of heroes who dare to change: Bulworth takes the podium to proclaim the truth of incestuous campaign contributions; Jerry Maguire writes a memo through the night, proclaiming that human connections must vanquish greed if the world is to be



set right; Everett Ulysses McGill escapes from prison in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and finds deliverance with the Soggy Bottom Boys; and in *Stranger Than Fiction* Harold Crick must become a character fated to die in a novel narrated in his head before he can learn to live.

Change is the stuff of art. The storyteller hooks and transforms us with change. The visual artist lays out change on a canvas, in a sculpture, tattooing our brain with change. And art may lead to change in our own lives, or it can be worn like a medal for a war we never fought. We go to a movie, read a novel, visit a gallery, and feel transformed, as though we actually fought in the war, scaled the mountain, loved the woman, and felt the loss. We can be cheered; we can think of things we otherwise never would have imagined; we can cry; and we can become uncomfortable when art takes us too far: He lost himself, we say, somewhere along the way.

Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Walden* that: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats."

Let's consider for a moment that this might be true. Let's assume that we're quietly desperate because we lack something we must have, but we don't know what it is. Like some primeval itch at the core of our being, we're driven to distraction; we scratch and scratch and never find relief even after we've divorced our spouse, found a new mate, stopped talking to our children, changed jobs, moved to a new town, got a raise, bought a bigger house and fancier car.

We imagine, perhaps when watching a movie or reading a book, that there's a family, a community that is so ideal that all concerns are addressed, all fears are allayed, where everyone gets along, where, like Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegone inhabitants, all women are strong, men are good-looking, and children are above average. Such can be life, we reason, but we've not got there yet.

Balderdash! Who is so naïve?

We change until we die and love life more for having made the journey difficult. We feel dead when we don't change. Some of us turn more to religion and education to focus the itch on growth and understanding. Some of us channel our passion for change into our jobs or activities outside work. Regardless, for reasons that remain mysterious, the day is bleak when there is no opportunity for change.

But we can also consider ourselves unique: I want to change for the better, I say, but the other fellow is stuck in his ways. While recognizing that we ourselves want to grow and change, we are frequently unwilling to recognize the same capability in others. We pigeon-hole those with whom we disagree. He'll never change, we say, when someone gets in the way of the way we'd like things to work. To desire change in ourselves without acknowledging the same potential in others who go about it in their own way, struggling against different adversaries but similar odds, is a waste.

How different it would be next time we're in the company of one with whom we disagree to say: He'll surely change.

Though naturally, having said this, we must diligently help him on his way.

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