

From 9/11 to COVID-19, It's Been a Perpetual State of Emergency

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*“The fundamental political question is why do people obey a government. The answer is that they tend to enslave themselves, to let themselves be governed by tyrants. Freedom from servitude comes not from violent action, but from the refusal to serve. Tyrants fall when the people withdraw their support.”—Étienne De La Boétie, *The Politics Of Obedience**

Don't pity this year's crop of graduates because this COVID-19 pandemic caused them to miss out on the antics of their senior year and the pomp and circumstance of graduation.

Pity them because they have spent their entire lives in a state of emergency.

They were born in the wake of the 9/11 attacks; raised without any expectation of privacy in a technologically-driven, mass surveillance state; educated in schools that teach conformity and compliance; saddled with a debt-ridden economy on the brink of implosion; made vulnerable by the blowback from a [military empire constantly waging war against shadowy enemies](#); policed by government agents armed to the teeth ready

and able to lock down the country at a moment's notice; and forced to march in lockstep with a government that no longer exists to serve the people but which demands they be obedient slaves or suffer the consequences.

It's a dismal start to life, isn't it?

Unfortunately, we who should have known better failed to maintain our freedoms or provide our young people with the tools necessary to survive, let alone succeed, in the impersonal jungle that is modern America.

We brought them into homes [fractured by divorce](#), distracted by [mindless entertainment](#), and [obsessed with the pursuit of materialism](#). We institutionalized them in daycares and afterschool programs, substituting time with teachers and childcare workers for parental involvement. We turned them into test-takers instead of thinkers and automatons instead of activists.

We allowed them to languish in [schools which not only look like prisons but function like prisons](#), as well—where conformity is the rule and freedom is the exception. We made them easy prey for our corporate overlords, while instilling in them the values of a celebrity-obsessed, technology-driven culture devoid of any true spirituality. And we taught them to believe that the pursuit of their own personal happiness trumped all other virtues, including any empathy whatsoever for their fellow human beings

No, we haven't done this generation any favors.

Given the current political climate and nationwide lockdown, things could only get worse.

For those coming of age today (and for the rest of us who are muddling along through this dystopian nightmare), here are a few bits of advice that will hopefully help as we navigate the perils ahead.

Be an individual. For all of its claims to champion the individual, American culture advocates a stark conformity which, as John F. Kennedy warned, is "[the jailer of freedom, and the enemy of growth.](#)" Worry less about fitting in with the rest of the world and instead, as [Henry David Thoreau urged](#), become "a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought."

Learn your rights. We're losing our freedoms for one simple reason: most of us don't know anything about our freedoms. At a minimum, anyone who has graduated from high school, let alone college, should know the Bill of Rights backwards and forwards. However, the average young person, let alone citizen, has very little knowledge of their rights for the simple reason that the schools no longer teach them. So grab a copy of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and study them at home. And when the time comes, stand up for your rights before it's too late.

Speak truth to power. Don't be naive about those in positions of authority. As James Madison, who wrote our Bill of Rights, observed, "All men having power ought to be distrusted." We must learn the lessons of history. People in power, more often than not, abuse that power. To maintain our freedoms, this will mean challenging government officials whenever they exceed the bounds of their office.

Resist all things that numb you. Don't measure your worth by what you own or earn. Likewise, don't become mindless consumers unaware of the world around you. Resist all things that numb you, put you to sleep or help you "cope" with so-called reality. Those who establish the rules and laws that govern society's actions desire compliant subjects. However, as George Orwell warned, "Until they become conscious, they will never rebel, and until after they rebelled, they cannot become conscious." It is these conscious individuals who change the world for the better.

Don't let technology turn you into zombies. Technology anesthetizes us to the all-too-real tragedies that surround us. Techno-gadgets are merely distractions from what's really going on in America and around the world. As a result, we've begun mimicking the inhuman technology that surrounds us and have lost our humanity. We've become sleepwalkers. If you're going to make a difference in the world, you're going to have to pull the earbuds out, turn off the cell phones and spend much less time viewing screens.

Help others. We all have a calling in life. And I believe it boils down to one thing: You are here on this planet to help other people. In fact, none of us can exist very long without help from others. If we're going to see any positive change for freedom, then we must change our view of what it means to be human and regain a sense of what it means to love and help one another. That will mean gaining the courage to stand up for the oppressed.

Refuse to remain silent in the face of evil. Throughout history, individuals or groups of individuals have risen up to challenge the injustices of their age. Nazi Germany had its Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The gulags of the Soviet Union were challenged by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. America had its color-coded system of racial segregation and warmongering called out for what it was, blatant discrimination and profiteering, by Martin Luther King Jr. And then there was Jesus Christ, an itinerant preacher and revolutionary activist, who not only died challenging the police state of his day—namely, the Roman Empire—but provided a blueprint for civil disobedience that would be followed by those, religious and otherwise, who came after him. What we lack today and so desperately need are those with moral courage who will risk their freedoms and lives in order to speak out against evil in its many forms.

Cultivate spirituality, reject materialism and put people first. When the things that matter most have been subordinated to materialism, we have lost our moral compass. We must change

our values to reflect something more meaningful than technology, materialism and politics. Standing at the pulpit of the Riverside Church in New York City in April 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. urged his listeners:

[W]e as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society. When machines and computers, profit motive and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

Pitch in and do your part to make the world a better place. Don't rely on someone else to do the heavy lifting for you. Don't wait around for someone else to fix what ails you, your community or nation. As Mahatma Gandhi urged: "Be the change you wish to see in the world."

Stop waiting for political saviors to fix what is wrong with this country. Stop waiting for some political savior to swoop in and fix all that's wrong with this country. Stop allowing yourselves to be drawn into divisive party politics. Stop thinking of yourselves as members of a particular political party, as opposed to citizens of the United States. Most of all, stop looking away from the injustices and cruelties and endless acts of tyranny that have become hallmarks of American police state. Be vigilant and do your part to recalibrate the balance of power in favor of "we the people."

Say no to war. Addressing the [graduates at Binghamton Central High School in 1968](#), at a time when the country was waging war "on different fields, on different levels, and with different weapons," *Twilight Zone* creator Rod Serling declared:

Too many wars are fought almost as if by rote. Too many wars are fought out of sloganry, out of battle hymns, out of aged, musty appeals to patriotism that went out with knighthood and moats. Love your country because it is eminently worthy of

your affection. Respect it because it deserves your respect. Be loyal to it because it cannot survive without your loyalty. But do not accept the shedding of blood as a natural function or a prescribed way of history—even if history points this up by its repetition. That men die for causes does not necessarily sanctify that cause. And that men are maimed and torn to pieces every fifteen and twenty years does not immortalize or deify the act of war... find another means that does not come with the killing of your fellow-man.

Finally, prepare yourselves for what lies ahead. The demons of our age—some of whom disguise themselves as politicians—delight in fomenting violence, sowing distrust and prejudice, and persuading the public to support tyranny disguised as patriotism. Overcoming the evils of our age will require more than intellect and activism. It will require decency, morality, goodness, truth and toughness. As Serling concluded in his remarks to the graduating class of 1968:

[“Toughness is the singular quality most required of you...”](#) we have left you a world far more botched than the one that was left to us... Part of your challenge is to seek out truth, to come up with a point of view not dictated to you by anyone, be he a congressman, even a minister... Are you tough enough to take the divisiveness of this land of ours, the fact that everything is polarized, black and white, this or that, absolutely right or absolutely wrong. This is one of the challenges. Be prepared to seek out the middle ground ... that wondrous and very difficult-to-find Valhalla where man can look to both sides and see the errant truths that exist on both sides. If you must swing left or you must swing right—respect the other side. Honor the motives that come from the other side. Argue, debate, rebut—but don’t close those wondrous minds of yours to opposition. In their eyes, you’re the opposition. And ultimately ... ultimately—you end divisiveness by compromise. And so long as men walk and breathe—there must be compromise...

Are you tough enough to face one of the uglier stains upon the fabric of our democracy—prejudice? It's the basic root of most evil. It's a part of the sickness of man. And it's a part of man's admission, his constant sick admission, that to exist he must find a scapegoat. To explain away his own deficiencies—he must try to find someone who he believes more deficient... Make your judgment of your fellow-man on what he says and what he believes and the way he acts. Be tough enough, please, to live with prejudice and give battle to it. It warps, it poisons, it distorts and it is self-destructive. It has fallout worse than a bomb ... and worst of all it cheapens and demeans anyone who permits himself the luxury of hating."

The only way we'll ever achieve change in this country is for people to finally say "enough is enough" and fight for the things that truly matter.

It doesn't matter how old you are or what your political ideology is: wake up, stand up, speak up, and make your citizenship count for something more than just voting.

Pandemic or not, don't allow your freedoms to be curtailed and your voice to be muzzled.

It's our civic duty to make the government hear us—and heed us—using every nonviolent means available to us: picket, protest, march, boycott, speak up, sound off and reclaim control over the narrative about what is really going on in this country.

Mind you, the government doesn't want to hear us. It doesn't even want us to speak. In fact, as I make clear in my book [*Battlefield America: The War on the American People*](#), the government has done a diabolically good job of establishing roadblocks to prevent us from exercising our First Amendment right to speech and assembly and protest.

Still we must persist.

So get active, get outraged, and get going: there's work to be done.