

What I could have been doing

31Jan2021

In browsing through some old blog posts for ideas (Yes, I'm a literary re-gifter, what of it?) I came across a piece from 2013 in which I listed all the things I could do instead of working on my thesis. At that point in my life, I was *this close* to finally finishing my degree after all those years of finding reasons not to and in that post, I was again engaged in finding excuses.

The thing is, performing none of the listed activities – and certainly not finishing my thesis - would have contributed to preventing the quagmire in which we now find ourselves. Oh, I did finish the thesis and I completed many of the items on the list but now, I find myself wondering, so what? I mean, there were things on the list that were necessary in the then-near term, things like doing the grocery shopping and putting together a CARE package for a differently located daughter. But really, if I had time to write a blog post listing relatively inconsequential ways to occupy my time....

Things were happening back then. Some good things, yes, but also some bad things. Things involving racism and misogyny and gun culture and regionalism. Strange ideas were coalescing into what would become a foul soup of conspiracy theories. And false patriotism made flag worship a requirement of social discourse even as the waving of the banner increasingly represented vastly different world views, some having nothing to do with what I would consider patriotism.

All of these things were seeded in our society, many of them perennially so, and while I worried about groceries and academic turns of phrase, ideas that would have horrified me were germinating, growing, spreading spores of ignorance and hatred.

I might have raised my voice against the evil. Added my shoulder to the wheel. But I didn't, because I wasn't paying attention. And in not caring enough to notice, I was in fact making a choice. I had become what Elie Wiesel warned me against becoming, that most damningly complicit of characters in our passion play, the bystander.

I've written many times over the years about the value of noticing. An activity I still hold dear. But getting through the times we face and emerging more whole, as people and as a society, is going to require more active verbiage. We can't just see the thing happening; we need to pay attention.

Paying attention. What a novel idea! All those years as this trouble was brewing, I could have been – *should* have been – paying attention. We all should have been. The signs were there but signs need to be read.

Recent events have forced even the most ostrich-like among us to take note of the fissures in our societal fabric. As promised, I won't go into the who/what/when but if you're reading this you know of whence I speak. We're seeing the results of complacency on the part of people of good will.

Our problems won't go away by themselves, no matter how fervently we may hope it to be true. We have – I have – to pay attention. It's what I could have been doing all along. I slept while the monster crept.

No more. We need to pay attention. Actively, intentionally, intelligently.

And then, we have to speak up. Because the crowd driving the madness won't desist of their own accord. And crazy never really sleeps.