

## We Change the World by Doing Nothing

By Suzanne Soo Hoo

In a recent report by the American Educational Research Association's Consensus Panel on Teacher Education, Etta Hollins (2003), whose role it was to examine teacher education programs' ability to meet the needs of underserved communities, concluded that many of these programs offer candidates a strong foundation in social justice but they generally do not provide comprehensive strategies for prospective teachers to work with neglected and disenfranchised student populations. What this finding suggests is that while progressive teacher educators are proficient in raising awareness around issues of equity, justice, and democracy, there is a great deal of work that needs to be done to advance the necessary tactics to enact these principles.

But even when teacher education programs provide practical strategies for combating oppressive practices in schools, student-teachers frequently report that they are faced with institutional barriers that block their ability to operationalize critical pedagogy in their classrooms. Prospective teachers often state that they cannot find ways, nor are they encouraged, to integrate new ideas into old, defunct, institutionalized schemata that continue to shape learning and teaching in the places

that they work. In addition, many student-teachers are struggling just to keep up with the overwhelming demands of the existing curriculum. And finally, there are those educators who are complacent with the status quo and thus reject efforts to democratize schooling.

While critical academics recognize the need for teacher education programs to help infuse equity and

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excellence in schools and eliminate discriminatory barriers, many politicians (republicans and democrats alike), corporate elites, and conservative educators are working diligently to eliminate such programs and pedagogical practices. These reactionaries are holding tight to, and when need be are generating new, ruthless language, cultural, and educational policies, practices, and standards that have and continue to victimize so many children — in particular, low-income, linguistic-minority, and racially diverse students.

Given this sordid state of affairs, why is it that the general public seems complacent with the government's conservative chokehold on education in this country? Why aren't more communities renouncing the narrowing of textbook selections, the profusion of scripted teaching, the obsession with standardized testing, the erosion of student, teacher, and community participation in decision-making processes, and other such exclusionary, discriminatory, and thus undemocratic trends? Where is the resistance?

While dissent is muffled in public schools and marginalized in the larger society where the flow of information and the tone of debates are controlled by so few (Bagdikian, 2000; McChesney, 2000), alternative voices are loud both on the Internet and in our teacher education internship classes. Although these voices carry a spark that could ignite a brighter future, the quiet of the masses evokes despair, for in the shadows lies apathy.

The focus of this essay is on what I refer to as "bystander apathy." Bystanderism is the response of people who observe something that demands intervention on their part, but they choose not to get involved. I write this piece to shed light on this issue for others as well as for my own self-reflection — to understand more deeply why some people act against abuses of power and others don't; why sometimes I act and sometimes I don't. What are the forces, both internal and external, that work to keep us all from speaking against and standing up to injustice? In the end, the ultimate question that we all have to face is: If we do nothing, will we have changed the world?

## Learned Bystander Apathy

Apathy is Lethal!  
—AIDS poster in Los Angeles

Learned apathy is the product of socially sanctioned and institutional practices that work to shape the public psyche. For example, years of socialized indifference under a Communist regime, coupled with fatalistic Chinese philosophies, have significantly inculcated political apathy in Chinese people up to the present day (Yung, 1995). As such, many citizens resist involvement in political activity.

During the Holocaust, ordinary people learned to be extraordinary bystanders. Bystanders were the human beings who were "conspicuous not by their absence, but by their silence" (Barnett, 1999, p. xiii). As Victoria Barnett (1999) argues, "...

Auschwitz is what happens when good people choose to do nothing” (p. xiv). For many people, authoritarian power was perceived to be so great that it neutralized individual ethics. They didn’t complained or protest because they were led to believe that they had nothing to fear if they simply conformed to their new circumstances. Even many survivors of the Holocaust reported that in their attempts to conform, they lost the personal freedom to act with decency.

It is important to emphasize that the point being made here is not that the maniacal power structure of Nazi Germany could easily have been eliminated by good people who simply needed to act out against it. In fact, this monstrous military and ideological force crushed dissent and a great many courageous civilians lost their lives fighting against Hitler’s SS. In this analysis, I am simply curious about the critical mass of people from various walks of life that stood by and watched as this happened. Even survivors reported that in their attempts to conform, they lost the personal freedom to act with decency.

While the United States — a democracy — has an extensive history of democratic struggle and civil disobedience, at the root of such mobilization is a long legacy of brutality and large-scale apathy. People have enacted, while and others have watched, horrific racist policies and practices: the conquering of Native Americans, the enslavement of African peoples, the annexation of the Southwest and the abuses of the Mexican people living there, the harsh exploitation of Chinese immigrants throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War, and the recent plethora of policies and practices that hurt people both domestically and internationally. But policies and practices come from somewhere and more often than not, the politicians that create and realize these atrocities are elected. To seek out apathy in this country, one simply needs to look at the low voter turnouts rates during elections.

On a more interpersonal level, how do we as a people generally respond when unexpectedly faced with a crisis situation in our daily lives — when someone else is being victimized right in front of our eyes? David Gershaw (1999) notes that historically in this country, witnesses of abuse and violence fail to act on behalf of victims. For example, over 30 years ago, Kitty Genovese was murdered in an attack that lasted 45 minutes. It was witnessed by 38 of her neighbors. On May 25, 1997, in a Las Vegas casino, Jeremy Strohmeyer molested and murdered 7-year-old Sherrice Iverson. His friend, David Cash watched. and did not try to stop Strohmeyer or call the police.

Inner cities have been characterized by the media as spaces filled with jaded, uncaring, and apathetic city dwellers. Visitors to New York are instructed by tour guides not to look up at the sky scrappers and not to stop for any sidewalk disturbance. They explain that someone who is apparently sick on the sidewalk could easily be a ruse to distract pedestrians, making them easy pickpocket targets. Tourists are instructed to walk callously past homeless, needy people.

While these two examples may seem like extreme and relatively isolated

incidents, it's not as if scenes of violence, abuse, and despair are rare in the United States. By 2001, there were 32.9 million people living in poverty, and that number continues to rise (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). There are now over 3.5 million homeless people in the country and 39 percent of them are children ([www.nationalhomeless.org](http://www.nationalhomeless.org), 2000). While misery is prevalent in our daily lives, particularly in urban centers (though also in suburban and rural areas), inner cities have been characterized in the U.S. as spaces filled with jaded, uncaring, and apathetic inhabitants. Visitors to New York City are instructed by tour guides to not look up at the sky scrappers or stop for any sidewalk disturbance. Tour guides explain that someone who is apparently sick on the sidewalk could easily be a ruse to distract pedestrians, making them easy targets for pickpockets. Tourists are instructed to walk callously past homeless people.

Countering this prevalent turn-the-cheek mentality that renders invisible the misery of impoverishment, depravation, and homelessness, Bertrand Ramcharan (2003), the United Nations Acting High Commissioner for Human Rights, stated on the occasion of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty:

Poverty is a violation of basic human rights, which is very often forgotten.... We must count it among the serious gross violations of human rights: (p. 1)

And yet, people continue to turn their backs to these omnipresent crises. Are we conditioned to accept unpleasant and seemingly unchangeable realities? Is it possible that bystanders do not grasp the gravity of a particular phenomenon? Can an event or set of conditions be so disorienting that bystanders become confused and disabled when contemplating their significance? Perhaps bystanders see the problem as someone else's and not their own?

In trying to answer these complex questions, John Balzar (2003), a columnist for the Los Angeles Times, cites the work on cognitive dissonance of Joel Cooper, a professor of psychology at Princeton University who suggests that denial or the act of resisting new knowledge and exposure that is potentially discomforting is natural for the human beings because "to acknowledge it could call into question one's very purpose in society" (p. 4). That is, to admit one has witnessed an unjust act means that one is compelled to respond with some moral action. Therefore, homeostasis is best achieved if we look the other way, if we cover our eyes and ignore the disruptive phenomenon, thus eliminating psychological dissonance. Consequently, we take the path of least resistance by ignoring much of the world around us. This allows us to disassociate ourselves with things like homelessness or war. As Barnett (1999) points out:

People adjust to their political circumstances. Most people are far more preoccupied with maintaining the normal rhythms of their lives than with the wish to become involved... (p. xv)

While the above insights in part help to explain the ubiquity of bystanderism, they do

not explicitly address those social and institutional practices that enforce conformity and indifference. Instead of pointing the finger at human nature — which presupposes the inevitability of apathy, how much of peoples' indifference and inactivity is due to what Donaldo Macedo (1994) refers to as the social construction of not seeing: where the dominant ideology — that is largely responsible for the misfortunes, injustices, and discrimination that so many people face, — works to divert the public away from identifying and confronting its abuses of power? Or, how much of learned apathy is the result of “manufactured consent” — the ideological process of getting people to believe that what they are doing is in their own as well as others' best interest (Herman & Chomsky, 2002)?

## Forces of Conformity

### Schools

Educational institutions at their core are agencies of socialization. Unfortunately they are often used to train students to be obedient and follow rules without question. Practitioners who work within the tradition mode of teaching insist that students' absolute compliance with imposed rules and regulations is necessary to effectively teach and maintain order. Conservative teachers and administrators thus reward conformity and punish disobedience. Within this strict environment, speaking out or speaking against a teacher's decision or practice typically gets a student sent to the principal's office for discipline. Reprimand of this sort is obviously intended to enforce silence.

Student reluctance to speak up in schools that endorse a top-down power structure is best exemplified by the fish lesson taught by S.J. Childs (2002), a high school Social Studies and English teacher. Childs opens the lesson by warning high school students that if they speak without permission, they will get a referral. The teacher proceeds to scoop two live fish out of a fishbowl and onto her desk. No one says a word; they just stares in disbelief. The fish are clearly struggling for their lives, and yet there is silence. A couple of students mutter under their breath, “She's killing the fish.” After almost three minutes, one student, abandoning sanctions, takes a risk and shouts, “Save the fish!”

Childs uses this lesson, with reservations, to teach students about conformity and the cost of keeping quiet when witnessing an injustice. One student explained that he assumed that the teacher was in charge and therefore he trusted her decision. Others confessed that they didn't want to get in trouble. After weighing the options, only one student felt that it was worthwhile to speak up. Although Childs is uncomfortable with the intentional mistreatment of the fish, she reasons that this is a small cost to teach human beings empathy and the need to act. She also wants her students to examine in depth why some people speak out against injustice and others don't.

The Culture of Niceness

Nestled in schools is the teachers' lounge — home of the duplicating machine, coffee-stained mugs, and daily dilemmas. It is both a social hub and a problem-solving ward. This is where teachers identify daily crises, craft solutions, and exchange resources with the speed and deftness of emergency room procedures. This is a place for school gossip, last-minute administrative directives, and commiseration over mandates.

Typically in elementary schools, although not exclusively, lounge activity is contained by a "culture of niceness." This unwritten lounge ethos prevents anyone from being too critical or "too negative." Within this realm, teachers are expected to be "nice," meaning that they should not make waves. This is not a place for educatorsteachers to critically engage each other or publicly reflect on the serious problems that they face at work. Our teacher interns tell us that when they bring up important issues in the lounge, like a racist incident that happened in the hallway, their concerns are often reduced to meaningless verbal assuaging. The interns report that, after a while, this type of treatment prompts teacher frustration and eventual apathy and complacency.

The culture of niceness permeates classrooms as well. "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all" is a familiar American adage deeply rooted in our notions of civility and politeness. Students and teachers are taught not to express criticism and negative feelings in schools (Berlak & Moyenda, 2001; Boler, 1999; Obidah & Teel, 2001). "Classroom talk should be civil, polite, and respectful" (Berlak & Moyenda, 2001, p. 108). "Talk should be rational and dispassionate" (Boler, 1999, p. 63). While politeness and respect are important ingredients for healthy interaction, this particular social protocol quells critical, rigorous dialogue and the individual and collective search for truth (Agyris, 1990). This is where bystanderism is germinated as honesty and ethical concerns are suffocated.

Outsiders to the school culture are either unfamiliar with the protocol of 'niceness' or they have developed resistance strategies that disrupt the domesticating effects of its illusionary comfort zone. Sekani Moyenda (2001) recalls a story in her childhood when her mother complained to the principal about a racist teacher. When the principal offered to move Moyenda to another class, her mother replied:

Why? She's going to have to deal with asses all her life. She might as well learn all about them now. (p. 57)

Audre Lorde (1984) captures the sentiment that compromised communications under the auspices of niceness can invalidate human beings when she said, "I cannot hide my anger to spare your guilt. . . . For to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts" (p. 130).

Where all think alike, no one thinks very much.

—Walter Lippmann

One way to determine what is the right thing to do in a social situation is to find out what other people think is appropriate. Robert Cialdini (1993) maintains that people often look for social proof and approval when they are unsure of themselves or in situations of uncertainty and ambiguity. While social proof can benefit individuals, Cialdini warns that it can also contribute to pluralistic ignorance. Pluralistic ignorance is defined as a herd mentality of mindless compliance.

Since 95 percent of the people are imitators and only 5 percent initiators, people are persuaded more by the actions of others than by any proof we can offer.

—Cavett, 1993, p. 118

A potential byproduct of pluralistic ignorance is that individuals develop and rely on routines that they are often unaware of. At times, especially under extreme circumstances, it's as if they navigate the world around them on automatic pilot. These phenomena may provide some insights into a recent Rhode Island nightclub fire where 91 people died because they chose to escape through the door that they had previously entered with others rather than find alternative fire exits. It may also explain the mob mentality of 135 teenagers who broke into their friend's home to loot and destroy it without one of them stopping to think that this was wrong (ABC News, 2003).

Pluralistic ignorance is often embraced by leaders of groups who understand that strict compliance with protocol reproduces the relationships of power within the group and thus sustains the existing hierarchy. Scrutiny of power is the last thing that undemocratic leaders want and work to encourage.

What also needs to be pointed out here is how groups, knowing that there is safety in numbers, pressure members not to go astray. Like the crab in the bucket phenomenon, when one tries to climb up the wall of the bucket to escape, the others are quick to pull it down.

#### Fear of Social Alienation and Reprisal

Fear also immobilizes individuals from acting. The continuum of fear runs the gamut from physical threat to social alienation. Some groups, who have a history of being abused in a society, often report that they are taught to not take risks, "don't get involved" and "don't ask questions" in certain circumstances so that they don't draw unwarranted attention. The historically embedded fear of being lynched or castrated still causes some African-American mothers to teach their young children to keep their distance when passing white folks for fear that any behavior could be misinterpreted (Gauntty-Porter, 2003). Other groups have been taught to mind their own business so as to not arouse undue suspicion about their immigration status.

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For many people, canvassing the social and political landscape to better read the risks of acting is a necessary survival skill (Sleeter, 2001).

Many groups also report a reluctance to stand and speak out because of their own cultural norms. For example, to bring attention to one's self by speaking up would violate the culture's construct of humility. Latinas in our teacher preparation program commonly report a double cross to bear with culture and gender acting as barriers to their own self-advocacy.

Some fear is also rooted in religious doctrine. "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone," prompts my colleague to self-reflect, "If I speak up against an injustice, will someone then expose my weaknesses in the future?" (Cardinal, 2003).

In the classroom, students are often paralyzed by anticipated social criticism. Unsure of their knowledge base, they hesitate to engage fully in the classroom because they fear humiliation and rejection. In other words, they find security in avoidance. While this tendency is understandable to a certain degree, what are perplexing are those times in class when someone says something that is obviously unacceptable — something that should immediately evoke moral outrage — and no one speaks up. The silence awakens a childhood fear in me as I, as a teacher, desperately try to interpret the void. Is the emptiness felt in my soul peoples' inhumanity to other people? Do I fear that I am alone in a world that doesn't care?

## Taking Responsibility

He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Bystanders often plead ignorance and try to escape responsibility by hiding behind the banner of innocence — to be an innocent bystander means to be blameless or a mutual victim of a situation. Innocence provides a pretext for ignoring the world around us. Rebutting this idea, Barnett (1999) argues, "Bystanders are confronted by a wide range of behavioral options, and they bear some responsibility for what happens" (p. 7). Also rejecting this excuse of innocence, post-Holocaust awareness studies put forward a moral standard: should one choose to do nothing, or be silent and thus permit the oppressive act to occur, one is as guilty of the crime as the perpetrator.

It seems fitting, in this current age of accountability, that we renew our vows to hold one another accountable for our actions. Laws have been drafted to make people more responsible for crimes that they witness (Gershaw, 1999), which means that bystanders can no longer hide behind the cloak of blamelessness or innocence. Instead they are forced to see their apathy as a form of complicity through indifference and denial (Macedo, 1994). A fresh application of standards has been painted on social justice work helping to map out the road ahead of us (Andrzejewski, 2003).

Of course, morals and ethics are something that a democratic society needs to debate and negotiate. The idea of mapping out the road ahead does not assume that there is a concrete and thus inflexible plan. Unlike conservatives, who embrace un-negotiated and fixed standards, we as a society need to actively engage ourselves in understanding and deciding what is right and wrong. We also need to realize that sanctioned codes of moral conduct don't come with guarantees. Given the society's more powerful ideological conditioning towards individualism and self-interest — which paradoxically leads to blind conformity, do we have the will to change? If faced with a crisis situation, would we resist the internal and external pressures that so often lead us to resort to the false sense of 'security' that conformity offers and take action to do what is morally right and just? Are we willing to face adversity, knowing that for every act of courage, there is a personal risk? What would it take to put one's self in danger as a means to benefit an entire community?

What people need to realize is that individual rights and freedoms come from the very communities that sustain such liberties. Therefore, as individuals, it is in our best interest to take steps to pierce the 'culture of niceness' and resist the undemocratic forces of conformity as they deny those freedoms protected by a vibrant, critical, and participatory community. It is also important to recognize that as individuals are inextricably linked to social experiences it is in collaboration with others that we are best able to sort out our confusion about the world — by joining with others for dialogue, clarity, solidarity, and moral support. It is in these everyday interactions that social agency comes to life. Margot Stern Strom (1998), Executive Director of Facing History and Ourselves, reminds us that intellectual and political direction can be achieved through our daily conversations, discussions, and debates: "Democracy is shaped by ordinary people and the choices they make about themselves and others (p. 1). . . . Although the choices may not seem important at the time, little by little, they define an individual, create a community, and ultimately forge a nation" (p. v).

Democracy is a collaborative struggle in which we work with others to forge a more just and ideal society. It is in this critical collaboration, rather than in the paralysis of pluralistic ignorance, that, we discover the very threads that bind us together as part of the human community (Barnett, 1999). And, we realize that if any member of the community is unsafe, all are in danger because on any given day the social and political context can change to someone else's disadvantage or even demise. Therefore, to survive, one needs allies, not bystanders. Both individually and collectively, we are responsible to rupture and eliminate the pattern of socially conditioned bystanderism.

### Nurturing Critical Thinkers

Cialdini (1993) suggests that often it is not because people are uncaring or insensitive, but rather that they are unsure of what to do, which prevents them from

acting. Our society provides very few outlets for disseminating strategies for public participation. Even the teacher education programs that Hollins (2003) described earlier as being concerned with social justice don't help us distinguish between standing for something and standing up to something. In order to confront abuses of authority, one must be well prepared to counter opposition — often powerful forces — while maintaining one's own moral ground. Encouraging and realizing this critical and courageous posture is getting even more difficult to do because the emphasis being placed on standards-driven instruction, standards-based curriculum, test-driven accountability, and state mandated expectations is effectively displacing any progressive mission to develop students into thoughtful, engaged participants of a democratic society. Disillusioned students (SooHoo, 2002) and teachers (Ohanian, 1999) are an indication that test-driven accountability has worked to deskill learners and enforce conformity and apathy.

During these stifling times, it is that much more urgent for teacher educators who work under the banner of social justice to critically evaluate their programs for the omission of concrete classroom strategies and to equip prospective teachers with a wide repertoire of alternatives to traditional classroom content. If we are asking of our students to change the world, then we need to offer them the necessary tools, possible and promising alternatives, and a realistic look at likely barriers. How does theory get translated into practice? How should we define the competencies that both experienced and aspiring teachers need to effectively activate a social justice agenda? What are the skills and abilities that educators need to identify, critically examine, and act on issues of inequity?

In order for the development of ethical principles and actions to be front and center in one's education, students need critical, reflective teachers who strategically defy the conservative stronghold on public education and help learners deconstruct relations of power and their role in the production of subjectivity, knowledge, incentive, and strife. Opportunities to critically examine conflict and assess the economic, social, and political conditions that produce it should be abundant and accessible in public schools. It is in these experiences that students learn to articulate a moral position, forge coalitions, and develop the courage to stand up for equity, justice, and democracy.

Critical pedagogy, which is both the epistemological and instructional arm of critical theory, offers prospective teachers and public school students a great deal of insight for engendering praxis. Students of critical pedagogy become proficient in naming, problem posing, critiquing, creating alternatives, and developing action plans. This work takes place in a learning context that is supported by norms of risk taking, collegiality, and honest dialogue. Dynamic student-centered strategies and new and emerging social and political literacies can awaken human consciousness. However, without action, critical consciousness is incomplete — as is action without theory.

Paulo Freire (1970) expressed long ago in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which people transform the world. (p. 76)

To break free of the constraints of silence, Freire (1970, 1987) insists that we become 'subjects' of history and not 'objects' that simply watch the world go by. In order to insert ourselves in the world as subjects, Freire's theory of conscientization involves raising consciousness through developing awareness of the social, political, and economic forces that shape our lives and our ability to act upon that world. It is by questioning ourselves and making a commitment to action that praxis shows its power. From this vantage point, it is not that educators don't know what needs to be accomplished in order to democratize their classrooms and the larger public sphere; there is however a question about whether we are willing to make the necessary changes to move towards this goal (Parker, 1997).

Readers may be asking themselves: What about the very real fact that, as expressed earlier by student-teachers, school systems around the country don't allow for this type of critical practice? To transform this reality, teacher education programs need to work more rigorously to develop creative partnerships with communities outside of schools in order to struggle in numbers to fight against the oppressive forces that work to domesticate rather than activate the public. We need to work in multi-interest coalitions to generate a free flow of information so that people can more easily inform themselves about important issues, and in turn transform the larger, and unjust social order and the educational practices that ideologically reflect it. In this way, educational institutions will ultimately be transformed by the public and critical pedagogy will become part and parcel of everyday life, both in and outside of schools.

At the very least, we need to reconsider and honestly assess what our institutional programs and classroom practices are designed to accomplish. If we are sincerely intent on nurturing civic responsibility and caring individuals and communities, our productivity certainly can't be measured by standardized tests. Rather than allowing the choke hold of conservative mandates to undermine our work or deplete our moral energy, we need to act in ways that are consistent with a more just and democratic vision of the world. If we theorize on the sidelines and forsake critical collaboration and action, we will surely realize that we have compromised our ethical vision and changed the world by doing nothing.

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This poem was written after the Columbine tragedy. It was meant to capture the possible preconditions that led to the violent acts. The title words haunt me whenever I search for moral clarity.

## We Change the World by Doing Nothing

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### So What Are You Going to Do About It?

By Suzanne SooHoo

You told me to go out to the schoolyard and make friends  
Kids teased me about my glasses and locked me in the dark bathroom  
When they let me out, my face and my pants were wet.

And my tormentors said, "So What Are You Going to Do About It?"

You told me to be good, follow the rules and never speak unless called on  
I always raised my hand and waited my turn  
But it was the outspoken, articulate, risk-taking kid that became valedictorian.

And the teacher said, "So What Are You Going to Do About It?"

You said work hard and go to every practice  
I dribbled that ball until my fingers were numb  
But you recruited a new player, someone taller and faster.

And the coach said, "So What Are You Going to Do About It?"

They said they wanted me to attend their college  
They needed diversity on their campus  
But they didn't tell me I would be lonely and have no homeboys to kick it with.

And college admissions said, "So What Are You Going to Do About It?"

Find a girl, get married, have a baby  
It happened so fast  
Never got a chance to figure out if life would be better with Joe.

And my parents said, "So What Are You Going to Do About It?"

Make money, live in the suburbs, away from those "others"  
I don't know who I am anymore or where I came from.

And society said, "So What Are You Going to Do About It?"

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