

HOLR Prompt: “If I could change anything…” 10/22/23

On any given day my sentiments may change but I do have thoughts on this in accord with the current state of my academic journey as well as the state of our world, particularly our country. I’m reading a lot about how we’ve arrived at this current state of mass incarceration. I want to quote our former President, Lyndon B. Johnson from 1968:

Now we’ve come to a question that weighs very heavily on all our minds, yours and mine. This nation must make an all out effort to combat crime.

This is from his address regarding the Crime Control & Safe Streets Act of 1968. My point is that narratives are dangerous and they have consequences. Powerful figures, like the president, in tandem with the media can bombard the public to create moral panic and influence the zeitgeist — “the spirit of the times.” I agree with many scholars that this was a point in time when our country began to turn away from rehabilitative sentiments and adopt a culture of retribution and revenge. Since then, our country has been layering on punitive measures resulting in a hateful nation with countless prisons full of desperate bodies.

Accordingly, this is what I’d change— our nation's cold and hardened hearts, our inability to love and forgive. I’d stop the media and news outlets from polarizing violence and perpetuating fear based narratives from day to day hell, hour-to-hour. The news always starts with murder, shootings, car-jackings, kidnapping, and rape. The more repulsive the news the more likely it is to be the breaking story. If you want to enjoy a primetime TV show, you will likely be consuming C.S.I, F.B.I., Chicago P.D., Special Victims Unit (SVU), NYPD, on a episode of “20/20” or “Datelines” highlighting a gruesome murder. You’re likely to see the “Teacher of the Year” award presentation at the end of the segment-saddening.

A lot of times when we think of changing the world we are talking about idealistic visions of a world that may never come to fruition. I don't believe my vision of a world that is filled by love rather than hate is out of reach. When we have Illinois State Senators inside Stateville enjoying our performances and shedding tears on behalf of our suffering — we are changing things. I'm encouraged that I sit and work alongside staff and students of all walks of life to champion abolition. We suffer together but we suffer *courageously* because there's meaning in that. We know that love and forgiveness have the power to transform systems and heal hearts. We know that “no one is free until we are all free.” We know that “you are, because I am.” My prayer is that we can all adopt loving hearts and, instead of looking at crimes as an act to be punished, maybe we can see it as a hurtful act where harm needs to be healed.