



# CHOOSING BEING: how to respond to today's unhealthy state of affairs

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### SITUATION

*There are three fundamental directions or foci in which our lives may advance: doing, having, or being.*

We live in a world that expects from us continuous productive or consumption activity. Be it at work, in the market, or at school, we are being asked to do more and more. Doing, it seems, is the ticket to success. After all, the saying goes, you haven't seen anybody getting places by sitting on their butt. We love to boast about how much we have accomplished and, better still, how much there remains to do! Who can deny that we are competing with each other (and with ourselves) as to who is the one most overwhelmed with work? So, doing, getting-things-done is the mantra running our daily lives. We accordingly pack our days from dawn to dusk with activities aimed at achieving maximum benefit. And, naturally, we transfer this lifestyle to our kids whose schedules are so busy with extra-curricular activities (designed to put them ahead in adult life) that they have no time to ... play! Our 'try-to-keep-busy' stoic attitude also cuts into our leisure time (i.e., we come back from vacation more tired than we left), the gym (Oh, boy! Do you know how much I lifted today!? ... and that's nothing to what I still have to do in the coming weeks according to my new

work-out routine), and even spiritual practices (i.e., guess who is getting more enlightened, righteous, or closer to God?).

Of course, the striving for doing is only one side of the coin. The other side is the simultaneous expectation for uncritical consumption. Buying, getting, using up, having are not just legitimate ways in which to spend our free time, but a socially accepted (and surely needed) mechanism of psychological compensation. And more, much more. In fact, it has taken on patriotic value: the best contribution a concerned citizen could do right after 9-11 (as requested by the President himself) was ... to go shopping! The message is loud and clear. If we are not busy doing, then be busy consuming, but be busy. Don't stop! Just keep on going.

Indeed, living in America today means to be 24/7 busy. So accustomed have we grown to this situation that even when we are not busy, we feel in need to fake that we are. Who hasn't found oneself pretending to be working when somebody is watching? It is as if the more it is demanded from us, the more we do, the more we buy or have, the busier we are, the higher is our self worth and placement in society, and, supposedly, the better we feel.

The socially accepted way to escape this onslaught is media. We are allowed to (often expected to) leave the busy and consumption

cycles and plunge into digital entertainment and connections. Who hasn't been relieved to receive a phone call in the middle of some uncomfortable waiting or quiet time? Who hasn't quickly turned to our smartphone seeking some unnecessary information (so we can remain occupied)? TV, the internet, flicks, radio, Twitter, videogames — you name it — are ways for us to leave behind the little reality left in our lives lest we break the spell and return to some ugly, unacceptable, frightening world. Media consumption, the adult pacifier/drug par excellence, keeps us 'entertained' (i.e., from Latin: being in between, i.e., in limbo) and, in doing so, maintain us in a fabricated trance: comfortably numb, asleep.

Those people, practices, activities, discourses, or beliefs critical to or not fitting in this picture are quickly spotted and discredited. In our extreme neo-puritan ethics, hanging-out, idling, not doing are seen as parasitic, aberrant if not plain subversive acts. Not having a cell phone or TV/internet at home are looked down upon: what kind of weirdo are you? Not joining the shopping way of life risks socialist or anti-American condemnation. In short, social labels and judgments are readily available to explain any and all of these non-sense attitudes: ignorance, psychological disturbance, immaturity, naïve idealism, religious fundamentalism, leftist anarchism ... We just need to keep the system going, and for this, we are reassured over and over again, we must have the production, consumption, and media machinery running undisturbed (now globally). Never mind the results of these actions.

*Doing and having have won the day.*

## **RESPONSE**

Faced with this state of affairs, seeing it for what it is, we could decide to take an alternative path so that we can begin to heal and awake from this collective hallucination. Moving in the right direction is not that hard to figure out once we realize the situation. It just demands that we

engage opportunities that focus on 'being' rather than 'doing' or 'having.'

And this starts by diminishing the enslaving cycles of unchecked production and consumption (material or virtual) and creating the mental-emotional-physical space-time wherein we can step back and become aware of our circumstances. We must find excuses and sanctuaries for guiltless idling: events, places, and times to find, enjoy, and expand being. To put it differently, by resisting the pressures to be busy, consume, and/or plunge into the mediasphere, we become able to notice our being alive. By deciding to provide ourselves with a necessary retreat from real-world disease, we promote healing, both at the individual and collective levels. By fostering and celebrating not-doing, not-having, stopping, and letting be, we begin to liberate ourselves from the bondage of socio-cultural programming. We will know if we succeed when we find ourselves in the here and now of our lives feeling whole, awakened, alive, and yes, joyful!

Developing being means to engage the subjective (personal, individual self), intersubjective (social, collective self), and objective (environmental, no-self) dimensions of human experience (i.e., first-, second- and third-person perspectives). It means to direct ourselves to observe, study, exercise, express, and taste being's mind, body, and connectivity with others and nature. This effort may need separation and connection at different times, often accepting opportunities to deal with ourselves in solitude, while other times seeking chances to come together in community and with nature.

Although it should be evident from these short considerations, growing being is professing the appreciation and support of all life — for being is life. Hence, affirming being, re-establishing a balance between 'having,' 'doing' and 'being' is a spiritual proposition, whether one is religious or not. This is because it demands us to "re-ligare" (i.e., the Latin root of religion), which means nothing else than to re-connect with the broadest and deepest realms of all — something

which has never been severed to start with — only forgotten. Not surprisingly, several faith traditions in the East and West do encourage us to practice being over having and/or doing. An excellent example, especially in the context of this discussion, is the following statement by Pope John Paul II:

*“Ours is a time of continual movement which often leads to restlessness, with the risk of ‘doing for the sake of doing’. We must resist this temptation by trying ‘to be’ before trying ‘to do.’”<sup>2</sup>*

Our way to respond to today’s unhealthy state of affairs is thus to **choose being** by affirming, developing, and celebrating its *unfolding* alone and in community.