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Topic: Change or Time

CHANGE

“Change is a big word.” This was the answer Ava DuVernay (director of “Selma” and “A Wrinkle in Time”) gave to a question she was asked on the PBS News Hour the other night. The interviewer asked DuVernay if she thought real, permanent cultural change would result from the Harvey Weinstein scandal, the #MeToo movement, Oscar awards to women and other recent events that would seem to suggest that deeply ingrained attitudes might be shifting. She, like so many of us, does feel hopeful, but also skeptical.

Change in an individual life is constant and frequent. We change our clothes, paint our houses, trade our cars; we may change jobs, move to another state, marry or divorce. This sort of change is integral to everyday life – something we all experience and, though we may sometimes resist it, we don’t generally question its inevitability.

But isn’t change in a larger, more long-term sense, a different matter? Isn’t it less inevitable; a little more problematic? Marriages based on the belief that one partner will change to satisfy the expectations of the other usually fail. Resolutions to quit smoking, be more patient, stop procrastinating may be sincere, but to change ingrained habits and perhaps deny inborn tendencies can be very, very difficult. And the hope that behaviors and attitudes deeply entrenched in a society for generations can change overnight, or even in the matter of a year or a decade, while it is certainly worth entertaining and supporting, may not be entirely realistic.

In my lifetime I’ve seen how major events can change the world. During the Second World War, for example, women took on new roles, working in factories and running businesses while the men were away fighting. This change at first seemed to have been temporary and impermanent. During the ‘50s many if not most of those women left the

workplace and resumed their stay-at-home lives. But something in society had shifted. New roles had been tested, and gradually, in fits and starts, feminist goals and ideals moved from the fringes closer to the center of social normalcy.

Many of the cultural changes I've observed during my 80 years have been of this nature – fitful, incomplete, one step forward, half a step back. The euphoria and idealism of the '60s gave way to cynicism and despair in the wake of the assassination of the era's heroes. While there has been progress in the areas of social justice and civil rights, there has been a good deal of back-sliding: mass incarceration of African Americans; continuing poverty for large masses of our population; unequal pay and opportunity for women and minorities. Progress has been made, yes, but slowly, not steadily and never completely.

Will the current cascade of sexual harassment charges and the subsequent loss of power and status of the accused be enough to permanently change this aspect of our culture? History would suggest that sudden, dramatic change is unlikely. But history would also suggest that once an issue becomes as big as this one has become it cannot be stuffed back into Pandora's box. It's likely that the powerful will often continue to exercise their power over vulnerable subordinates in inappropriate ways, and that centuries old attitudes toward male and female relations won't change overnight, but I believe that a subtle shift is taking place that will affect the thinking of nearly everyone. The next guy interviewing a pretty young thing for a job in his organization will think twice before reaching for her breast, or worse. Let's hope so.