

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #188

October 2024

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‘To be or not to be ...’



This week I am at Chautauqua Institution doing a series of talks for its fall Roads Scholars program, but tonight my wife Judy and I will be part of the sellout crowd at the Bayfront Convention Center as Liz Cheney and Sister Joan Chittister, O.S.B., begin Global Summit XVI. In **Book Note #186**, which can be found here [#186.pdf \(jeserie.org\)](#) I said that Liz Cheney honors our time and the very idea of America by having the courage to do what Hamlet only dithers about before finally and clumsily deciding to act.

Cheney said “yes” in reply to Shakespeare’s famous question “To be or not to be, that is the question ...” when on January 6, 2021, she experienced an attempted coup against the United States of America.

She didn’t dither; she chose, for what is freedom but, as Milton Friedman told us, the right to choose.

Cheney chose to defend the U.S. Capitol, American democracy, and the very idea of America itself.

For that, we are all in her debt.

In other **Book Notes**, I have noted that by saying “yes” in reply to Shakespeare’s famous question you answer the primal existential question. By saying “yes” you become fully alive and accept both the burden and the beauty life affords.

Having made that choice, the question becomes “How to Live”? As noted last week, Montaigne tells us to “pay attention” – or in the now somewhat shopworn phrase, “to be here now.”

How?

To live is to act; not to passively drift through one’s allotted time. Paraphrasing Tennyson, to live is not “to rust unburnish’d but to shine in use.”

As I have said many times, explication can kill a poem, so I won’t explicate (maybe in a future **Book Note**), but for now here is Shakespeare’s famous exhortation “To be or not to be...”

from Hamlet III, iii

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die – to sleep,
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub:
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,

Must give us pause – there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

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