

From reaction to response

By [Julie A. Mavity](#)

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There are so many horrific events in the news. What do we do with the tumult of feelings that rushes through us when we hear about them? How do we navigate this world of lightning-fast news and online echo chambers where we can block particular perspectives and opinions? In these charged, gut-wrenching times, how do we process information and determine what course of action might align with our values?

In seminary a professor assigned “reaction/response papers.” After each reading assignment we wrote our immediate *reactions*: thoughts, feelings, questions, and challenges. Days later, after class discussions and additional reading, we returned to the original reading and wrote *responses*—both to the reading and to our initial reactions. Our responses were sometimes more nuanced from our reactions, and sometimes completely different from them. The reactions were rooted in immediacy, instinct, and reflex. The responses offered room for reflection, consideration, and agency.

Bayard Rustin, the architect of the 1963 March on Washington, epitomized a peaceful response to violence. Rather than reacting with retaliation, he echoed Martin Luther King Jr.’s ideal of passive resistance. Rustin, an openly gay black man, faced animosity and threats. His response was to listen and work behind the scenes in order to model peace. He led largely through silence, but when he spoke [his words were reasoned and thoughtful](#):

I have lived with and fought racism my entire life. I have been in prison 23 times. I have seen periods of progress followed by reaction. I have seen black young people become more and more bitter. I have seen dope addiction rise in the Negro communities across the country. I have been in a bombed church. My best friends, closest associates, and colleagues-in-arms have been beaten and assassinated. Yet, to remain human and to fulfill my commitment to a just society, I must continue to fight for the

liberation of all men.

Rustin responded to a reactive world of violence with thoughtful reflection and peaceful advocacy.

When we react to crises out of pain and protectiveness, our unconscious assumptions, biases, and beliefs rise to the surface. We often seek to blame someone, either to create distance from the tragedy (it can't happen to me) or for control (now we know how to prevent this). In the throes of impassioned reactivity, we tend to default to however we've been shaped to interpret the world. We find it easier to trust familiar people and perspectives and to hold others in suspicion, particularly when we feel vulnerable.

It's not wrong to react, to ask questions, or to hurt alongside victims of violence. Laments reflect healthy *reactions*. The Psalms, for instance, faithfully give voice to a broad range of reactions to trauma and horror.

Danger arises, however, when our reactions produce actions without taking the time for reflection and gathering further information. Reactions are dangerous when they generate targets and plans without the process of checking our unconscious or instinctive ways of interpreting events. It's safe to say that we do not want Psalm 137, wherein the author fantasizes about bashing babies' heads against rocks, directing our courses of action. Vengeance is never a faithful response, even if it's an understandable reaction.

Jesus models a healthy integration of reaction and response, particularly in the beatitudes and the command to love enemies. When faced with trauma, the biblical Jesus takes time to meet God in solitude and prayer; he also takes time to meet God in other people. This is the miracle and the challenge of the incarnation. If we want to move beyond whatever unconscious dynamics shape our reactions to tragic events, we must seek God in others. Faithful response involves expressing our pain and then listening to the pain of others.

How do we measure reactions and responses within our Facebook posts, our policies, our relationships, and our votes? How do we sit communally with our angst and our anguish without jumping to actions that reflect biases rather than values? Certainly there is some ambiguity in the distinction between reaction and response. And making such a distinction is no panacea for peace and justice. Still, I wonder whether taking the time to mark reactions and then develop intentional responses

might be a constructive practice in these very reactive times.

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