

The slow creep of injustice

When toxicity grows gradually, we get used to it. But we don't have to.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [September 13, 2017](#) issue



[An oil spill.](#)

The quality of cabin air is a growing issue for airline passengers. Pilots delay starting the engines until minutes before rolling away from the gate, which is good for saving fuel but hard on passengers, who have to sit in an unventilated aluminum tube as the cabin gets hotter and air quality falls. Interestingly, travelers are often unaware of how much air quality has deteriorated, because the changes occur incrementally.

Louis Pasteur, the brilliant French microbiologist, once conducted a classroom experiment to demonstrate how animals adapt to dangerous conditions. He placed a bird in a closed container for six hours. The bird grew sluggish and inactive as the air quality diminished, but it did not die. When Pasteur introduced a second bird of the same species into the polluted container, this new bird died immediately. The sudden immersion in toxic air was a shock it could not survive.

I don't know exactly what conclusions Pasteur presented to his students that day, but his experiment prompts me to think about our human adaptivity to dangerous environments, especially ones in which the toxicity has increased gradually. In

America, for example, we've grown accustomed to public school teachers spending significant sums of their own money to buy classroom supplies, because we've underfunded the proposition that a decent education is a right for every kid in the country.

We've also grown to accept high rates of juvenile incarceration, largely unaware of how the numbers have risen incrementally over the years. A foreigner might be shocked to learn that we spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to keep one adolescent in prison instead of investing in programs that could break the cycles of poverty and disadvantage that helped land him there in the first place. We've grown used to the idea that malnourished kids cry themselves to sleep in the richest country in the world, in large part because our attention and dollars are directed toward personal abundance and dieting programs. Similar stories of adjustment to slowly deteriorating conditions could be told with respect to violence as entertainment, the proliferation of guns, limited health care for the poor and elderly, and countless other national and global disgraces.

The slow creep of hate into new sectors of society should be of special concern. White supremacists have successfully mainstreamed hate, emboldened by the complicity of powerful people inside and outside of government. Who would have guessed that in our day so many people would be persuaded that violent hate speech deserves equal time in the public square? The landscape of hate has shifted gradually but remarkably. If the recently tweeted words of Nelson Mandela are correct, that people are taught to hate, and that "if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love," then we have a lot of loving to teach and learn. Perhaps we have some hate to unlearn as well.

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