

Abigail Disney

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Abigail E. Disney is a filmmaker, philanthropist, activist, and podcaster. She is a Founder of the Daphne Foundation, whose mission is to invest in solutions that result in a more equitable, fair, and peaceful New York City. She is also president and co-founder of the documentary production company Fork Films, where she produced the groundbreaking *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, co-created the subsequent PBS series *Women, War & Peace*, and launched a podcast entitled, “All Ears with Abigail Disney.” Abigail is also the Chair and Co-Founder of Level Forward, a new breed storytelling company focused on systemic change through creative excellence.

We’ve been told for quite some time that a rising tide lifts all boats. That’s all well and good, but I get a little suspicious of narratives that are so widely accepted that nobody tests them anymore.

With COVID-19 our new reality, we have no choice but to watch the “rising tide” narrative fall apart in front of us. In fact, as the tide moves further and further out, we have no choice but to confront the fact that many boats never left the ocean floor to begin with.

We can no longer deny that poverty and race are pre-existing conditions. For whatever reason—lack of decent healthcare, poor education, stress, genetics, it doesn’t really matter at this point—a significant chunk of our fellow citizens have not been dealt the cards they’ve needed to live their best, and highest, longest, and most meaningful lives.

All this is easy enough to say, but what can we do about it? Well, some politics will make a difference. Things such as a viable healthcare system that treats every single person well, or less pollution concentrated in low-income areas, or better access to healthy foods are not going to happen at scale until the politicians make them change. And that means we have

to support the politicians we think will make these kinds of changes happen.

But that is always such an unsatisfying answer, isn’t it? We also want to know how each of us can serve the greater good as individuals. And that’s what I love about us humans!! The bad people get all the attention, sure, but most of us are good to the core and want the best for others.

If we are sincere about change, we need to look at root causes. And, since all the policies I previously mentioned—healthcare, clean air, and healthy food—are things anyone could support, and since we have a political system that can’t arrive at a way to make any of those things happen, it is fair to assume something got in between what people want and their own political processes.

I don’t think it is useful to blame a particular person or party, or to let ourselves believe that everyone we disagree with is the devil incarnate. We are a democracy. So if everything feels like a mess, the buck kind of stops with us all, doesn’t it?

If you imagine democracy as a wall of bricks, and those bricks are unsound, then your wall is a failure. But if only some of them are, then your wall holds up. But there is one other important ingredient in a good, strong wall. It is mortar. The mortar wraps itself around everything. It is everywhere and nowhere. No one can say where it starts and stops.

That is culture. No matter how different each of us is, no matter whether we like the culture, it surrounds us, it permeates us, it holds us all together.

And culture is a thing of our own making. While no single one of us can make it, and no single one of us can break it, it is often made and broken by its very own constituent parts.

And yet, we can choose to be different. Not everybody will join us. But do we really have to convince everybody?

Imagine what this country would be like if even half of us took responsibility for seeing to the well-being of the mortar that holds us together. We don't have to repair the whole thing—just the bits around us.

Isn't this all just mawkish claptrap? Aren't people just naturally mean and violent? Is it just our destiny to be cruel and sadistic?

Well no, actually. In fact, more and more science has been showing that we were made not for battle but for cooperation. The latest science shows that more of human history has been spent at peace than at war. The latest science even shows us that the health of an individual person is increased the more that person lives in love and acts with generosity.

So if you think this is just woo-woo silliness, don't blame me, blame all the PhD's who've been turning our idea of human nature upside down. On the other hand, if you feel at least a little tempted to take my word for it, and if you feel like acting as though these things were true, how would that change your everyday behavior? How would that change the tone of your Twitter feed, your Facebook page, your Instagram posts? How would that change how angry you get at a slow line in the bank, or a waiter getting your order wrong?

The world is not run by leaders. Its atmosphere is not made by politicians or heroes. The sum and substance of life are not written about in history books, and most of the best things people do will go unremarked and unremembered. But it is still true that the world is made up of the billions of little choices made by every one of us every day.

Next time the tide comes in, try concerning yourself as much with the boats around you as with your own. Don't wait for the coast guard to save you, and know that if all you do is save yourself, you're in for a damn lonely life at the top. If you recognize that one by one we survive but together we thrive, if you do as much for others as you do for yourself, how much better a place will we all be lifted to, together? It's a mad and chaotic world--terrifying on some days, bewildering on others. But we can get through this pandemic, this new and treacherous political terrain if we will only remember that we are nothing without each other.