



## Change Your Reactions

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When you see a fight occurring between any two people (or groups of people), it is always the case that one side believes it is right about something and that the other side is therefore wrong. It could be a disagreement over a political or territorial issue, a religious belief, or something else. Countries take sides about one issue or another and entire wars commence and continue for generations--based on one country's belief that it is right and the other is wrong.

When you pick up any newspaper, you will see endless stories of conflict. I see so many stories about

- suicide bombers,
- sniper attacks in the Middle East,
- drug wars in Mexico,
- hotel bombings throughout the world,

and so forth that I do not even read these articles anymore. The entire first section of almost every newspaper out there is usually about one conflict or another: Conflict between people, conflict between governments, conflict within governments, and so forth. There is so much conflict going on that I simply cannot keep track of it and it has become boring for me to read. It is basically the same tired story over and over again.

There is so much conflict in the modern world, and so many countries are dedicated to taking sides, that one country has forged a real reputation for itself. Out of the hundreds of countries in the world, we are all aware of a single country that refuses to participate in any external conflict: Switzerland.

I used to be a [litigation attorney](#), and this entire job involved two sides fighting it out to prove in court that one side was right and the other was wrong. Conflict is huge business and many lawyers make millions of dollars a year helping various people fight conflicts:

- The companies that sue other companies believe they are right.
- The people who sue the companies believe they are right.
- The companies that sue the people believe they are right.
- The people who sue other people believe they are right.

In addition to lawyers, some of the biggest companies in the United States and in other countries have become rich and powerful by making weapons that assist with conflict.

Conflict is about ego. It is about saying that I am right and the other person is wrong. When people get divorced, it is usually because one person is wrong and the other person is right about something. I can remember that when I was going through a breakup with a live-in girlfriend several years ago, a fundamental issue was that I was not organized and neat enough. I was "wrong" because I did not organize my closet in a certain way (shirts of a certain color did not always go together), and I was "wrong" because I was not organized enough. There were also some crazy things that I thought my ex-girlfriend was wrong about as well. Nonetheless she would certainly tell you that I was wrong about more things than she was. Even in deciding who is wrong there is a balance, which kind of functions like a points system:

*I may have done some bad stuff but you have done more bad stuff; therefore, I am more right than you are.*

This is the nature of conflict. We are always blaming another person for something. People disagree all the time. Life is about disagreement. Everyone is in disagreement about something--more often than not, although you may notice that some people disagree more than others.

If you meet a man on the street who is down on his luck and sitting in a gutter, and you ask him why he is there, he will always have an explanation. His explanation will almost always involve someone else and something someone else did to put him in his current situation.

When you speak to someone who got fired from a job, his or her explanation will almost always involve someone else and something that someone else did.

When I am out and about in Las Vegas, I always see couples fighting and disagreeing about this or that. At Lawry's The Prime Rib the other night, there was a huge disagreement going on between a couple in the seat next to us:

"I only had two drinks."

"It is too much. You had a drink before we left too."

"I did not, and if I want to relax, it is my business. . . ."

"I am very upset that you will not listen to me. You need to change."

And so it goes.

During the dinner I got mad at the waitress because we waited more than forty-five minutes for our prime rib to arrive. Our waitress was wrong, of course, and I was right.

When I am walking down the Strip, I can always spot a couple disagreeing about this or that. Disagreement is pervasive, occurring on a consistent basis between people. People become angry over disagreements and this anger is something that is always there.

- People leave marriages because one person is wrong about something.

- People leave jobs because they believe their employer is wrong about something.
- People get angry at others because the other is wrong about something.
- People become alienated from friends and loved ones because they believe the other person is wrong about something.

*"You need to change . . . "*

One of the most popular sports right now is Ultimate Fighting. This, like all sports, involves one side winning and the other side losing. Sports, in my opinion, is a civilized form of war between two people or groups of people. One city can fight another city. In the Olympics, one country can annihilate another country--without endangering the welfare of its own people.

Many people spend a good portion of their time being angry and blaming others for this or that. They may be angry with another driver. They may be angry with a relative. They may be angry at a boss. Everyone wants to blame the other for their own unhappiness, their own shortcomings.

We are all struggling to be perfect, and to be something. Most of us are doing what we can to move toward some sort of ideal that we have for ourselves and for our place in the world. This ideal could involve a [better job](#), a better car or house, a different mate, getting our children into certain schools, winning a competition, or something else. We are all trying to move toward this ideal, and we will never reach it. Even if we reach aspects of this ideal for a short time, the chances are great that we will soon decide that another ideal exists, and we will then redirect ourselves toward it.

The problem with this struggle to attain our perfect life is that we are never, ever going to find the perfection we are seeking. There is always going to be someone more successful, happier, better off, faster, stronger, better looking, and so forth than us. We could reach one ideal of what we are seeking for ourselves; however, there are other goal posts that we will never reach. This struggle consumes most of our lives.

In Orthodox Judaism, the Sabbath (also known as Shabbat) is supposed to be a time during which people do no work. Cooking is not allowed. Commerce and spending money is not allowed. Not even writing with a pen or working on a computer are allowed. Driving a car is not allowed (this involves work because the pistons move up and down). Carrying objects a certain distance is not allowed because it involves work. Electricity is not allowed to be turned on and off under the more literal interpretations of Shabbat because this involves the movement of electrons and setting them to work.

Beyond doing no work, the Shabbat is a disconnection from the material world and from the act of "becoming" that most people constantly struggle with. Our days are generally filled with work and changing and trying to become something--we want to earn money; we want to improve in our careers; we want to get better at whatever we are doing; we do not want another person to get the upper hand on us in business. On Shabbat, people are supposed to do no work, to just be happy with who they are and contemplate the spiritual aspects of life. People are supposed to enjoy their families and lives, rather than worry about racing around from place to place, as we all do during the week.

What is interesting about this time is that it is a time when people can just be themselves, unencumbered by trying to change and become someone or something new. More importantly, commerce and work in some respects almost always involve a form of conflict:

*Is the person doing his or her work correctly?*

*Did I get a good enough deal?*

*Is this person cheating me?*

*Can I make this piece of work better?*

Hardly anyone follows Shabbat. In fact, most Jews do not follow it. The pressure of becoming, of commerce, and so forth is so strong that this spiritual aspect of life often goes ignored. We prefer to work and to be in conflict. It is what we are used to. In fact, most people's lives are spent within the conflicted struggles of business and commerce, working desperately to become something new. Even this one simple day of rest on Shabbat is a gift and a right that most people in the working world do not seem to give themselves.

What I find so profound about the simple idea of taking a day off from everything is that this is something that most of us never allow ourselves to experience. It is largely for this reason, I believe, that most of our world is continually in conflict, as we are also continually in conflict with ourselves and others.

We are always looking outside of ourselves for peace. We believe that our peace will come when we are able to change others. We blame others as the cause of our frustrations, failures, and disappointments. We feel angry with others. We are always trying to prove the other person wrong and trying to be right ourselves.

We spend our entire lives with an opponent, angry at others and the world. We go into depression about others and find ourselves angry, hurt, and torn up inside. We constantly try to move toward some destination in business, in our careers, and in our lives, and we feel tense that we are not arriving there. Our lives are spent in this tension, hoping to be or become someone else.

The best piece of advice I can give you is, *instead of looking outside of yourself for fulfillment, look within*. Your reaction to the world is what is controlling how you feel. When you feel tension, or react to the world in a negative way, you are creating that state within yourself that is characterized by frustration, anger, tension, depression, and all sorts of other negative emotions. The wonderful truth is that you are in charge of how you react, and when you choose not to react in a negative way, then your life will begin to change.

Most people spend their lives in a negative reaction, trying to change others or change their place in the world. We are always moving toward something. When we stop trying to move toward something and we stop reacting negatively, our lives become much more fulfilling.

My advice to you is to try changing from a position of reaction to one of acceptance of the world. When you *accept*, you can go much further along your way towards whatever goal you have, and you will have less conflict with the people you meet along the way. You do not need to, and often cannot change anyone, anyplace, or anything around you: What you can change is your reaction to what you encounter.

## **THE LESSON**

Your reactions to the world around you determine your state of mind and your progress in life. While most people tend to blame others for what is happening to them, you must learn to react in a positive way. You must understand that you usually cannot change the people and things around you, but you can control your reactions to these things; when you choose not to

react negatively, you open the door to growth and fulfillment.

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