

ON TENSION

By Tyler Howard with Owen Akeley

“Tension is the great integrity”

— [Richard Buckminster Fuller](#)

*“I’m starting with the man in the mirror
I’m asking him to change his ways
And no message could have been any clearer
If you wanna make the world a better place
Take a look at yourself and then make a change.”*

— Michael Jackson,

[Man in the Mirror](#)

“This is not my hat,” says a small fish on the first page of Jon Klassen’s eponymous bookⁱ. The protagonist goes on to tell how he stole the hat from a bigger fish, who surely will not notice it is missing, let alone know that it was the small fish who took it, or figure out where that small fish went. All the while, though, the book’s pictures tell a very different story—they show a big fish who realizes his hat is missing, and immediately sets out to find the little fish. After the two fish swim into some tall grass, the book ends with only the big fish swimming back out, the hat returned to its rightful place on his head. One review inside the back cover of the book calls this “perfectly pared-down storytelling which builds the tension and outrageous denouement with exquisite timing.” The quality of this story lies in this tension—the tension between words and pictures, between what is said and what is done, between perception and reality.

For some readers, the irony in the small fish’s words is quite easy to spot and reading between the lines as to what likely happened in the tall grass isn’t too much of a task. We are able to parse the tension between what we are told and what reality reflects, instead of taking the message we are presented at face value. This is the same skill some people might use when seeing advertisements for junk foods or alcohol featuring skinny, healthy, and successful-looking people. Successfully differentiating the image associated with a product from our realistic understanding of the products themselves is the path towards becoming an informed consumer. This skill is unfortunately not as prolific in adults as one might hope, evidenced by the abundant presence of junk foods and glamorized drinking cultures around the world, but the potential for developing it is in our hands. With a book like *This is Not My Hat*, Jon Klassen gives people a means of developing that skill as early as childhood. If a young person can

successfully separate what the fish is saying from what is actually going on in the book, they will be much better prepared to develop into an adult that can, and is willing to, accurately weigh for themselves the information they take in. The importance of this skill lies not only in producing better, more capable individuals, but in improving the world that we all live in. Simply put, that skill is navigating tension.

“The world is all gates, all opportunities, strings of tension waiting to be struck.”

— [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#)

READING THE SIGNS

In the 1960s, two groups in the US State of Alabama reached an agreement, aimed to diffuse tension—one group would remove humiliating signs from public spaces, and the other would halt their public protests aimed at those displays. But, “as the weeks and months went by,” wrote the leader of the second group, “we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise. A few signs, briefly removed, returned; the others remained.”ⁱⁱ This promise, intended

“If you want peace, don’t talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies.”

— [Desmond Tutu](#)

to diffuse tension, actually heightened it—just like the small fish, what the first group said did not reflect what was actually going on. Recognizing this, the second group chose to act. That group’s name was the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, one of the preeminent civil rights groups in American history. Their leader was none other than Dr Martin Luther King, Jr.

The description of MLK Jr.’s experience with this particular tension, that of injustice in the form of racially humiliating regulations and broken promises, is lifted directly from his now-famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. As the letter continues, King elaborates on the importance, and even the necessity, of navigating tension. While his words come within the context of the American Civil Rights era and his Nonviolent Direct Action campaign during the mid-20th century, the significance of his ideas are not limited to such a context, but rather insightful into any number of human truths.

“Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and **foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue**. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I am not afraid of the word “tension.” I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but **there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth**. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.”

He famously goes on to compare “a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.” In so doing, he acknowledges the natural human inclination to avoid tension, or to bury tension so deep as to ignore it, but asserts that tension, combined with justice, is necessary for positive peace. He backs this up describing the relative ineffectualness of addressing tension with violence, such as that by the Muslim Movement led by Elijah Muhammad, mentor to Malcolm X. From the beginning, Dr King and his peers acknowledged the delicacy with which tension must be handled, staying “mindful of the difficulties involved, [and]

“We may be brothers after all.”

— [Chief Seattle](#)

decided to undertake a process of self-purification. [They] began a series of workshops on nonviolence, and repeatedly asked [themselves]: "Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?" "Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?" This idea, of addressing tension in the world by first reflecting on and navigating the tensions present in yourself, is just as vital as exposing tension in the first place.

Facing racism in America is no easy task, and the world has never seen before or since a leader of such a movement who brought us so far, so fast, and with such efficiency. Dr. King showed that we can use tension as a tool, delicately and with compassion. It can be part of an empathetic relationship, where both you and your would-be enemy can grow, and eventually establish a different sort of relationship entirely.

CASE STUDY

Words and pictures are not the only forms of art that can call attention to tension. Below is a selection of photographs from a larger series called [*Study of Perspective*](#).



The concept is simple: photographs of some of the world's most exquisite examples of art, architecture, and culture— Beijing's Tiananmen Square, Venice's Piazza San Marco, the Volkshöhne in Berlin, the White House in Washington DC, and more—foregrounded by the photographer's left arm giving the middle finger. The finger in question belongs to Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei, and, like many of Ai's works, these photos hang in some of the most reputed art galleries in the world. Their worth comes not from technical quality or compositional beauty, but from their ability to unearth tension, calling it to the viewer's attention and demanding they address it.

"I call on people to be 'obsessed citizens,' forever questioning and asking for accountability. That's the only chance we have today of a healthy and happy life."

— [Ai Weiwei](#)

So, what are the tensions that these photographs unearth? If you are Chinese, Italian, German, or American, you likely feel at least a pang of anger—here you have an artist making a universal gesture of disrespect to one of the cornerstones of your nation’s identity. Even if you aren’t one of the nationalities in question, you likely have some understanding of the patriotic significance these landmarks embody. What Ai Weiwei seems to be saying with these photos is, bluntly, *f*ck your patriotism*. But, as our little fish friend has taught us, it is important to look past what the artist is “saying” and take a look at what is actually going on.

In 1989, the Chinese Government slaughtered hundreds to thousands (estimated—the official number was never released by Chinese authorities) of unarmed, nonviolent civilians in Tiananmen Square for publicly demonstrating against Communist rule. They addressed the tension created by public protest with brute force, one of the methods Dr King’s *Letter* warns against. Despite the Chinese government’s ongoing denial and covering-up of the massacre, a video has since spread world-wide of a man standing with his shopping bags in front of a line of tanks. It’s hard to watch the video without the hairs on the back of your neck standing up. Seeing this man’s bravery in the face of savage violence, his willingness to call attention to tension, is awe-inspiring. That man risked his life for what he believed.

It was only six years later, in 1995, that Ai Weiwei, posing as a tourist, gathered the courage to snap the first photo in this series, *Study of Perspective, Tiananmen*. He knew full well the violence this sort of action could provoke, and like the Freedom Fighters in the American South, was prepared to deal with the consequences. In fact, Ai Weiwei was jailed by Chinese officials in 2011 with no formal charges filed and questioned at length about the photo series and other pieces of protest art he had produced around the world. “Ai constantly shows a reminder that we need to represent our own values and not those created by others,” writes arts non-profit [Public Delivery](#) of *Study in Perspective*. “The institutions he is pointing towards are the ones that tend to stop or abide free speech, people empowerment or the democratic values in our society.” While it’s not easy for any human to have their individual values scrutinized, if we don’t continually address and reflect on our values (and their sources), we cannot grow.

Think back to your initial reaction to the photos above. Your gut reaction to the middle finger was most likely one of disrespect or disgust. And yet, if you’ve seen the video of the Tank Man, or even stills from it, or any of the other art it has inspired, your gut reaction was likely one of intense awe and pride. These two reactions are at tension.

LET THERE BE LIGHT



— [Banksy](#)

When tensions are brought to light, people tend first to react negatively to the light bearer for exposing tension, not to the tension itself for existing in the first place. Human instinct, when faced with tension, is often to “shoot the messenger”. MLK Jr. paid the ultimate price for being the messenger. Exposing a tension means forcing others to recognize it. For someone hearing that message, recognizing a tension means addressing it, and addressing tension likely means ushering in change. That can be a scary prospect, so the gut instinct to avoid change by condemning or eliminating the messenger is part of human nature. And yet, while so many humans are oft afraid of change, change is a requisite for growth. We can go back to *Letter from Birmingham Jail* for evidence that navigating tension is one of the best ways to bring about the sort of change that can better humanity.

“Everybody against me. Why? Why me? I have not brought violence to you. I have not brought Thug Life to America. I didn't create Thug Life. I diagnosed it.”

— [Tupac Shakur](#)

“we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely **bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive**. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, **injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience** and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.”

“An artwork unable to make people feel uncomfortable or to feel different is not one worth creating. This is the difference between the artist and the fool.”

— [Ai Weiwei](#)



Ai Weiwei taking a [selfie](#) in hospital after being beaten by police in 2009.

Now, ask yourself— did Ai Weiwei create a tension with *Study in Perspective*, or did he simply unearth what was already there? Is he the source, or simply the messenger?

Understanding the tension that Ai Weiwei, a Chinese citizen, must have felt in the wake of 1989's tragic events, and putting that into the context of what still goes on in China today, is one step. Successfully navigating the tension called forth by the photo *Study of Perspective, Tiananmen*, is another, more difficult step. But the next step, even more cognitively difficult, is extending that understanding to the entire series of *Study in Perspective*. To be able to ask yourself why Ai Weiwei might raise that same middle finger to the home of the US President, or to one of the major hubs of the Catholic Church. To examine in yourself why you, the viewer, reacted to these photos in whatever way you did.

From the perspective of the camera, the foregrounding of Ai Weiwei's arm puts the size of his finger on the same scale as the objects they depict in the background. So, while he is still “saying” *f*ck your patriotism*, it is in the sense that, even though governments and political ideology can be big and scary, and all these buildings and monuments can make us feel small and weak as

individuals, if you look from the right angle, you see that you—your hands and your mind—are really the most formidable force in the world.

DAILY TENSIONS

Each and every one of us deals with tension on a daily basis. In fact, small-scale tensions in our everyday life are actually what give us purpose and meaning, acting as driving factors for growth.

Think, for example, of a game of solitaire. You shuffle a deck of cards, then attempt to order them in an organized way. You deliberately create chaos so that you can re-create order. The whole challenge of playing this game, what makes it enjoyable, is that tension between order and chaos. Winning the game means skilfully navigating through tension and coming out on the other side with that tension resolved. Ignoring the tension will fix nothing, leaving the cards in random order. Allowing the frustration of tension to guide you into, say, flipping the table or brushing the cards away, will only further the chaos. Skilful order is the goal. But that does not mean order without tension. The surest sign of tension's key role in the game is what happens when someone does win a game—the instinct is almost always to immediately reshuffle, starting all over again with a new form of chaos. The excitement of winning, of navigating that tension successfully, only pushes you to go back for more. The point of solitaire is not to live in a world without any tension (i.e. a world with only ordered card decks). The goal is to be able to successfully navigate a tense situation (i.e. a randomized deck) in a way that feels like progress. You feel smarter when you win at solitaire. You feel more accomplished, even if the challenge is in the small scale. That sense is what keeps us coming back. The game has no value without tension. Just as with so many of the things we do with our time, tension, and the potential for resolving that tension, is what motivates us to overcome obstacles and better ourselves.

Another prime example of both the ubiquity and the value of tension to the quotidian or frivolous pursuits of the human spirit is surfing. The tension of surfing, the challenge, comes from the fact that human beings are primarily designed to live on land, not in the ocean. We breathe air, not water, and our bodies are more efficient for walking than swimming. And yet, every day people around the world wilfully paddle out into the ocean, towards this tension, in search of a wave to ride. Non-surfers tend to scratch their heads. The first thing out of many non-surfers' mouths when talking to a surfer is danger—the rocks, the sharks, the prospect of drowning. They fear the tension created by a

“One can choose to go back toward safety or forward toward growth. Growth must be chosen again and again; fear must be overcome again and again.”

— [Abraham Maslow](#)

CLEOPATRA: The most infectious pestilence upon thee! (Strikes him down)

MESSENGER: Good madam, patience.

CLEOPATRA: What say you? (Strikes him)

Hence, horrible villain, or I'll spurn thine eyes Like balls before me! I'll unhair thy head! (She hales him up and down)

Thou shalt be whipped with wire and stewed in brine, Smarting in ling'ring pickle!

MESSENGER: Gracious madam, I that do bring the news made not the match.

— [William Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra Act II, Scene V](#)

land creature entering the fierce brutality of a surging sea, and question why anyone in their right mind would subject themselves to that. Instead of running away from tension, though, or trying to pretend it doesn't exist, the surfer discovers the value in confronting tension head on. Accordingly, the single accomplishment

that most surfers consider to be the pinnacle of the sport is known as getting barrelled—riding inside of the hollow tube created by a breaking wave. In that moment, the surfer is perfectly navigating tension, channelling all of the energy of a habitat where they “don’t belong” to discover a pocket where they “do”—breathable air where they can stand on two feet, only now with the unfettered ocean moving above and all around them. Just like winning at solitaire, getting barrelled on a surf board gives you an intense sense of accomplishment, and leaves you with a hunger for more. The fleeting nature of a wave makes the tension inherent to it only more valuable, and once you realize that value, it’s hard to keep away. Through the process of tension navigation, a surfer can push the limit of their own capability, and in riding a wave, dance with the tension nature throws us, instead of running from it.

TAKE THE JOURNEY

Imagine for a moment that you are a science teacher working in a rural school, where traditional religious beliefs are prominent in the general population. This could be in places of traditional African ancestral beliefs, the American Bible Belt, or anywhere else. How do you navigate the tension of teaching children information from books – researched and verified by scientists like you – when their parents and other role models might not be willing to believe it themselves? How do you respect their right to the evidenced truth about the world around them and their right to their own cultural background at the same time? This is a difficult situation, to say the least, but one thing for sure is that running away from the tension is no solution. Compromising your own evidence-based beliefs for the sake of perpetuating what might be a dangerous or ignorant status quo won’t work. On the other hand, using force, jamming science down children’s throats without paying deference to their background, won’t work either. Instead, you’ll have to confront the tension head on.

The closest approach to a solution would be leading by example—navigating your own beliefs of what science and religion stand for, and whether the two can coexist in your brain, before asking children to do the same. Dr King and his fellow Civil Rights activists called this “self-purification.” Once you have navigated that tension for yourself, the next step is to present that tension, as delicately and tactfully and honestly as possible, to the students, and facilitate their own navigation. Your job is to provide them the information to the best of your ability, but also to leave the proverbial ball in their court.

Philosopher and mythologist Joseph Campbell created a frame of reference for this whole process, that of confronting the uncomfortable things in your life instead of running away from them. Campbell called it the Hero’s Journey, detailed in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*ⁱⁱⁱ. While the technicalities in his theory abound, the basic structure is departure, initiation, and return. In order to achieve positive change, you must wilfully leave comfort behind (whether that’s physical comfort, ideological comfort, or anything else) and venture into the unknown. The Hero is the person who successfully navigates this unknown, this tension, and undergoes the change necessary to embody it. Then, with this change in tow, the Hero returns to their former, comfortable surroundings, with this new knowledge and growth, and uses it to better the world around them. The key here being, there is no shortcut. There is no way you can address tension half-way. Once again citing *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, “human progress never rolls in on

“They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.”

— [Andy Warhol](#)

wheels of inevitability.” If you want the people around you to change and grow, you must be willing to change yourself.

“The cave you fear to enter most holds the treasure you seek.”

– [Joseph Campbell](#)

INTO THE CAVE

Martin Luther King Jr. helped change America by bringing enough people into a space between. He called on people of all races to address the tensions built into their society. Instead of fearing tensions, he taught people to see tension as an opportunity for growth. He helped people go into a cave inside of themselves, the space between their former and future beliefs and selves. That space is where real human growth happens. Artists like Ai Weiwei and Jon Klassen see the value in this, using their art to help people question the world around them, encourage them to read between the lines, and navigate tensions of the real world. Through all of this, too, we are reminded not to shoot the messenger—not to blame others for exposing the tensions that exist within ourselves. To do this successfully, we must be the Hero in our own story. So, when next you are faced with tension, whether personal or in the society you live in, large scale or small, ask yourself—will you turn and run, or will you see the opportunity that lies between the lines, and enter the cave?

ABOUT THANDA

Thanda is a non-profit organisation based in rural Mtwalume on the South Coast of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Founded in 2008 as an after-school programme, the organisation has evolved to offer programmes centred around four core initiatives – Early Childhood Development, Education, Organic Farming, and Creative Learning — all designed to foster Game-changing skills in each member of our community. Lessons in our Creative Learning Curriculum and Training Programmes use resources and media from around the world to help participants and staff alike acknowledge the various tensions in their lives, including those rooted in culture, religion, upbringing, identity, and education. For example, we might look at the similarities and differences between hats from China and Lesotho, discuss the lyrics of rap songs, and explore Maya Angelou’s poem, “Life Doesn’t Frighten Me”. While challenging, we have found that these exercises are some of the most effective ways to bring about positive change in individuals and peace in communities.

More information on Thanda’s programmes can be found at www.thanda.org

ⁱ This et al. from: Klassen, Jon. *This Is Not My Hat*. Walker Books, 2014.

ⁱⁱ This et al. from: King, Dr. Martin Luther. “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* [King, Jr.], 16 Apr. 1963, www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

ⁱⁱⁱ Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton University Press, 1949.