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August 15, 2019: What Would “Bends Toward Justice” Mean to Doris Lessing?

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Title: What Would “Bends Toward Justice” Mean to Doris Lessing?

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8/15/2019—I am the moderator of the Bends Toward Justice podcast series, in which I talk to people about the teaching of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. It is pretty clear what Dr. King meant by this, at least in a general way. He did not invoke God per se, but something good is in charge of history. Progress is slow and not linear, but it does happen. Usually, anyway. The question for the podcast is what this means today to people without Dr. King’s strong religious faith?—which is most people. So, enter Madelaine Schwartz, reviewing Lara Feigel’s book about Doris Lessing: *Free Woman*. (NY Review, 9/27/2018). Feigel uses Lessing’s work, *The Golden Notebook*, to introduce themes of life and liberation. Here’s the relevant quote from the review: “Yet Anna believes that ‘every so often, perhaps once in a century, there’s a sort of—act of faith. A well of faith fills up, and there’s an enormous heave forward in one country or another, and that’s a forward movement for the whole world. Because it’s an act of imagination—of what is possible for the whole world. In our century it was 1917 in Russia. And in China. Then the well runs dry, because, as you say, the cruelty and the ugliness are too strong. Then the well slowly fills again. And then there’s another painful lurch forward.’” This is maybe more detailed than Dr. King had in mind. And Dr. King would have included particular nations—he certainly expected more justice in the US. But Lessing’s observation is good, because it points out that progress in one place in the globe inevitably affects everyone else. There is something irresistible about justice. Also, Lessing is helpfully pointing out that it may be more imagination than justice. First we have to imagine a future before a future can occur.