

# TO ACT OR NOT TO ACT

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"To be, or not to be" was the question troubling Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark. A somewhat analogous question troubling me has been whether "to act, or not to act." Torn by indecision, I finally decided to entrust the verdict to proverbial wisdom - to the accumulated experience of millions of human beings over a span of centuries. I therefore turned to reference works such as The Maximatic Confuser edited by Boris Randolph (New York: David McKay, 1958), the Dictionary of American Proverbs edited by David Kin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), and the "Proverbs" section of The Quotation Dictionary edited by Robin Hyman (New York: Macmillan, 1962). Surely, the proverb collections in these - and some other - reference works would be capable of guiding me in the right direction.

My initial search delighted me, for proverb after proverb urged me on to immediate action. Reproduced below are 33 representative such proverbs:

1. Strike while the iron is hot.
2. Procrastination is the thief of time.
3. The early bird catches the worm.
4. Make hay while the sun shines.
5. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.
6. God helps those who help themselves
7. Time and tide wait for no man.
8. Delays are dangerous.
9. Don't fiddle while Rome is burning.
10. Leave no stone unturned.
11. Never put off till tomorrow what may be done today.
12. A stitch in time saves nine.
13. Take the bull by the horns.
14. There's no time like the present.
15. He who would have a hare for breakfast must hunt overnight.
16. Plow deep while sluggards sleep.
17. He who hesitates is lost.
18. Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.
19. First come, first served.
20. Faint heart never won fair lady.
21. If you wait upon fortune, you'll never be sure of your dinner.
22. That which is well done is first done.
23. The golden rule of life is: Make a beginning.
24. The first in the boat has the choice of oars.
25. Well begun is half done.
26. Nothing seek, nothing find.

27. The first blow is half the battle.
28. Never do things by halves.
29. Actions speak louder than words.
30. The busiest man has the most leisure.
31. An hour in the morning is worth two in the evening.
32. The day is short and the work is long.
33. One hour today is worth two tomorrow.

Astonished by this overwhelming unanimity of advice, I became suspicious and started probing beneath the placid surface of the pool of proverbs before me. I soon found other proverbs flatly contradicting those above - 33, of them, as a matter of fact:

1. Haste makes waste.
2. Look before you leap.
3. Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.
4. Everything comes to him who waits.
5. Make haste slowly.
6. A rolling stone gathers no moss.
7. The more haste, the less speed.
8. What we do in haste, we repent at leisure.
9. The man in a hurry is in a hurry to go nowhere.
10. What is quickly done is quickly undone.
11. Never wade in unknown waters.
12. Better safe than sorry.
13. Watch your step.
14. Nothing is ever done in a hurry.
15. Think today and speak tomorrow.
16. Wait and see.
17. To talk without thinking is to shoot without aiming.
18. Second thoughts are best.
19. Be sure you are right; then, go ahead.
20. He who is hasty to give credit is light-minded.
21. There's nothing like being on the safe side.
22. There is a time for all things.
23. Go slow but sure.
24. Hear twice before you speak once.
25. Good and quickly seldom meet.
26. Don't cross the bridge till you get to it.
27. Let sleeping dogs lie.
28. Slow and steady wins the race.
29. You must learn to crawl before you can walk.
30. Measure thrice before you cut once.
31. Marry in haste and repent at leisure.
32. Discretion is the better part of valor.
33. First think and then speak.

I was appalled! my laborious research had produced 66 proverbs split right down the middle, canceling each other completely. What was I to do now? I saw only one solution - to appeal to Word Ways readers to tip the scales decisively, either in one direction or in the other, by submitting a slew of additional proverbs all counseling either action or inaction, but not both. Who will be the first to respond to my plea?