

## **Life Isn't Fair: What can we do about it?**

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Disturbing and grotesque images of children dying of starvation on the evening news seem surreal in our comfortable living rooms. These tiny children look more like skeletons wrapped in black skins. Too weak to move and too tired to protest, they let the black flies feed on their listless faces. Their large bulging eyes remind me of those of a dead fish. A deep groaning of despair fills the air.

I can't even describe the feelings and thoughts going through my mind. How could this be happening in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – an age of unparalleled progress and prosperity? What lies ahead for these children, even if they survive the famine? What have they done to deserve such brutal fate?

Walking through Vancouver Downtown Eastside (VDTE), I am also haunted by images of human misery. A homeless young man staggers along like a decrepit old man. Born to a prostitute in jail, introduced to hard drugs by his own mother at the age of 7, he has become a permanent fixture of the drug scene since childhood. Having gone through the revolving door of drug rehab 5 times, he is no longer welcome there. Is this young man condemned to a life of addiction?

In one of the long alleys of VDTE littered with garbage, a teenaged girl leaning against a huge dumpster injects heroine into her skinny arm. Raped and abused by her alcoholic father, she escapes to a life of prostitution and addiction. How could such things happen in Vancouver, one of the best cities to live in the world? Why are some people born into a cruel world with three strikes against them?

Life isn't fair. It never was and it will never be. Haven't we told our children umpteen times: "Who says that life is fair?" They will soon learn that nothing is evenly distributed. In fact, most things that really matter in this world are distributed as a bell-shaped curve. Thus, there will always be people who are disadvantaged as well as those who are privileged.

Down through the ages, people have wondered: Why do the wicked prosper, while the innocent suffer? Are we just pawns in a hostile universe? Should we resign ourselves to the fact that unfairness is an immutable condition of human

existence? Should we simply attribute injustice to bad luck, fate or karma? Should we consult the stars and wait for the tide to change?

But something deep inside me shouts out: “No, we cannot give in! No, we cannot let injustice prevail! ” Justice and fairness are worth fighting for, because these ideals are essential for human survival and for making life worth living. They are the cornerstones of Western civilization, the foundation for democracy, and essential ingredients of morality and ethics. We can all be better human beings, if we can truly embrace these ideals.

### **What is the meaning of fairness?**

Justice and fairness are closely related concepts. The former generally refers to compliance with some standards of rightness, while fairness refers to judgments that are free from biases. Central to both concepts is that each person should receive what they deserve.

But how do we determine what each one deserves? What criteria should we use? Let us consider the simple situation of dividing a cake for 10 people: A single mother with 4 young children, a married couple with three teenaged boys. What would be the fairest way to cut the cake? Should it be 10 pieces of equal proportions or different slices according to age or appetite?

Whichever criterion we use to cut the cake, there will always be grounds for complaint of unfairness. Every parent knows that no matter how hard they try to treat their children equally, some will always complain: “But it just isn’t fair!”

We cannot complain about our own lives, simply because others seem to fare better. It is essential that we do not confuse squabble over petty envy with waging wars against social injustice.

### **Competition and mimetic rivalry**

The scarcity of goods and services is clearly one of the root causes of unfairness. It is very difficult to agree on what is the fairest way to distribute limited resources. The problem of unfairness is further compounded by competition and envy. Somehow, we often desire exactly what others have. Have you seen two children fighting over the same toy when there are so many

other toys available? When one child picks up a particular toy, the other child right away finds it most desirable.

Adults often behave in a similar fashion. If we cannot obtain the same thing, we feel that the world is not fair. Such conflict is rooted in mimetic rivalry, according to French philosopher Rene Girard (1986). The desire to imitate others in order to get what they have is often unconscious, but it may have a pervasive and powerful impact on our behaviours. For example, we may gang up and scapegoat someone, when we cannot get what we want. We may even resort to violence or terrorism, when we come out as losers in [mimetic rivalry](#).

Mimetic rivalry can only be overcome by a spirit of generosity and grace – a totally different approach to problems surrounding fairness. According to this new calculus, fairness means how to maximize what is good to most people, even when it means personal disadvantages. Now consider the following two parables.

### **Grace versus justice**

At the end of the day, those who started working at 6 am were paid exactly the same amount as those who were hired at the eleventh hour. You can almost hear that complaints of unfair treatment grew from grumbling to a loud protest: "You have not been fair. We have worked all day long and some of the workers have only worked an hour, but you have paid us exactly the same." The owner replied: "Look, I have done nothing unjust. You and I agreed at 6:00 a.m. this morning that I would pay you a denarius for a day's work, and I have lived up to my end of the bargain. Do I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20: 1-15).

If the workers had a social conscience, they should rejoice that their fellow workers got the full day's pay, even though they got hired late. After all, they all needed the money to feed their families.

This parable from Jesus also tells us the difference between justice and grace. Justice demands that all be treated equally and everyone receives what one deserves. Grace dictates that the Dispenser of gifts is free to give to us what we do not deserve and what cannot possibly be earned. Grace is never fair, because it is no longer grace, when it is regulated by fairness.

### **Generosity versus equality**

Here is an old rabbinic parable as retold by [Father John Claypool](#), which reinforces the above point.

Once upon a time, there was a farmer with two sons. When he got too old to work, the two boys took over the chores of the farm. When the father died, they had enjoyed working together so much that they decided to continue their partnership rather than dividing up the estate. So each brother contributed what he could, they would divide equally the fruits of their labor.

Over the years the elder brother stayed an old bachelor, while the younger brother got married and had eight wonderful children. Now that the situation has changed considerably, what would be the fair way to share the profit? Should they renegotiate a different arrangement other than the 50-50 split?

The old bachelor brother thought to himself one night, "My brother has ten mouths to feed. I only have one. He really needs more of this harvest than I do, but I know he is much too fair to renegotiate. I know what I'll do. In the dead of the night when he is already asleep, I'll take some of what I have put in my barn and I'll slip it over into his barn to help him feed his children."

At the very time he was thinking down that line, the younger brother was thinking to himself, "God has given me these wonderful children. My brother hasn't been so fortunate. He really needs more of this harvest for his old age than I do, but I know him. He's much too fair. He'll never renegotiate. I know what I'll do. In the dead of the night when he's asleep, I'll take some of what I've put in my barn and slip it over into his barn." And so one night when the moon was full, as you may have already anticipated, those two brothers came face to face, each on a mission of generosity.

The old rabbi said that there wasn't a cloud in the sky, but a gentle rain began to fall. You know what it was? God was weeping for joy because two of his children had gotten the point. Two of his children had come to realize that generosity is the deepest characteristic of the holy and because we are made in God's image, our being generous is the secret to our joy as well. Life is not fair, thank God! It's not fair because it's rooted in grace.

### **Moral judgment of unfairness**

Strictly speaking, fairness is not about **getting what I deserve** but about **doing what is right**. Fairness or the lack of it should be a moral judgment based on

such objective criteria as following the established standards and due processes, and being free from discrimination, bias or deception. Unfair practices can have serious consequences – innocent people do get hurt and often get killed.

Genocide, slavery, segregation and apartheid are all examples of systemic discrimination. Any kind of discrimination based on group membership, socio-economic class, power differential or some arbitrary characteristics cannot be tolerated, because it deprives many individuals of their life opportunities. Regional disparities, the widening gap between the developed and developing countries also contradict the ideal of fairness and justice. The world cannot be a happy or safe place, when so many are dying of starvation through no fault of their own.

At the personal level, it maybe more difficult to distinguish between unfair treatment and the personal feeling of being not accepted for whatever reasons; still the feeling can be very real and painful. Consider the following scenarios:

- The big boss appoints his incompetent and corrupt relative to be your immediate boss, who claims credits for all your achievements but blames you for all the problems.
- The inner circle of your organization only consists of those who have passed the President's loyalty test – they are perfectly willing to lie and destroy others at the President's command. You are forever kept out of the decision making process, simply because you believe that blind obedience is unethical and unprofessional.
- You are the outsider looking in. You are never told the reason for being excluded, but you know that there is a set of implicit codes only known to the insiders.
- You fall through the crack because people cannot easily pigeonhole you and therefore do not feel save to include you in their groups.
- You are the scapegoat in the company, because you are the only minority, therefore, an easy and safe target in times of difficulty.

How should we react in the above situations? A victim's mentality would only make us more vulnerable to abuse. An outsider's syndrome may motivate us to

work harder to gain acceptance. But a still better approach is to consider the larger social implications of organizational injustice. What is personal is also universal. We need to ask: Is it a violation of human rights? Is it a case of abuse of power?

Unless we grasp the full significance of fairness in all human affairs, we may continue to pass indifference as tolerance. The struggle for social justice requires us to have some understanding of the basic principles of justice.

### Principles of Justice

Perhaps, the most fundamental principle of justice is declared by Aristotle: **"equals should be treated equally and unequals unequally."** It means equal work and equal pay regardless of gender or race. It also means the first in line gets served first regardless of one social-economic status. We now take these practices for granted, but let's not forget that not too long ago many had paid a heavy price to achieve social justice for women, minorities and the poor underclass.

The utopia of a just society will always elude us, but we can always make life fairer for more people. Let's begin with **distributive justice**, which refers to fair distribution of benefits and burdens. The winner-take-all economy of global competition has widened the gap between the haves and have-nots. God forbids that we should become indifferent to the plights of millions of children dying of starvation, AIDS and other infectious diseases.

**Retributive justice** refers to meting out punishment that fits the crime. However, we often fall short of the ideal embodied in the Statue of Lady Justice. She wears a blindfold and left hand holds forth a balance scale, signifying the imperative of fairness and equal justice for all before the law. Her right hand holds a sword to remind people that the law will be enforced. But injustice still exists in our legal systems. How many innocent people are languishing in prisons, while crime lords are still free to enjoy their ill-gotten gains?

John Rawls (1921-2002) has argued that social stability or unity exists to the extent that members of that society or organization feel that they are being treated fairly. He has articulated his theory of **justice as fairness** in his 1971 classic *A Theory of Justice*. In this book, Rawls sets forth the proposition that "Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. Therefore, in a just society the rights

secured by justice are not subject to political bargaining or to the calculus of social interests."

More recently, Angus Reid (1996) emphasizes the imperative of fairness in surviving and thriving in the new economy:

*Fairness is a fundamental ingredient in the cement of social capital that provides a country with a chance to survive and even succeed in the new era. Without fairness, civility becomes compromised and trust erodes (p.285-286).*

### **What can we do about unfairness?**

How can we make the world fairer? How can we make life fairer for those who have been abused, oppressed, but are unable to protect themselves? How do we react to all those violations of our beliefs in a just world?

#### **Just world belief**

Lerner (1980) has pointed out that our belief in a just world stems from our needs to predict and control our environment. Therefore, when we witness random violence or incidences of abuse, we tend to blame the victims in order to maintain a sense of personal security – they deserve it because they must have done something bad in the past, or because they are being careless. This kind of distorted reasoning becomes even stronger, when the victims resemble us in some way.

However, such unconscious defense mechanism is counter-productive in the long run. What happens to others may one day happen to us, if nothing is being done. A more rational and effective way to maintain our sense of control and security is to actively participate in anti-violence and anti-abuse measures. The best way to maintain our belief in a just world is to champion the cause of social justice and make the world fairer.

#### **The outsider syndrome**

Ostracism takes place in every domain of life even in a free and democratic society. When people are repeatedly excluded because of personal characteristics or group membership, they may develop an outsider syndrome. I know it in a deep and personal way. Well, this is not the place to tell my life story as a perpetual outsider. All I can say is that eventually I have come to the conclusion that if people want to ignore and exclude you, there is nothing you can do about it. You can make overtures, you can plead with them to let you in,

but the result is always the same – they simply ignore your presence and refuse to recognize your existence. It hurts!

The positive side of the outsider syndrome is that one may develop a greater capacity of empathy and a keener sense of social justice towards the outsiders. That is how I have acquired the reputation of being a “justice fighter” – always fighting for the underdogs and the oppressed.

According to my calculation, there must be more outsiders than insiders, because the insiders tend to be small clubs, who want to keep all the privileges and benefits to themselves by ostracizing the rest of the world. Therefore, if all the outsiders can get united, they can do so much for each other and for humanity.

Finally, I have learned that when people do not want to include you, you can always create your own game. That is how the International Network on Personal Meaning was created a few years ago, with a vision of being a big tent, welcoming everyone interested in learning how to live a meaningful life.

### **Make small contributions on a daily basis**

Francis Bacon said: “God shows himself best in his smallest things.” We may not have the power to change the world, but we can always make a difference in our little corner. It must begin with us, for fairness is a matter of the heart. We need to cultivate compassion daily, so that we will respond to others compassionately. If we can treat everyone with dignity and show kindness in all our interactions, we may help revive someone’s hope in humanity and faith in God.

There is so much we can do and so many opportunities for involvement. Participate in humanitarian efforts, such as the fair-trade movement and the anti-poverty movement. Volunteer in community services like the Salvation Army. Be an activist. We don’t need to be superheroes to fight injustice.

You are not alone. I am not alone. Together, our mighty voice can buoy the spirit of all the oppressed. Together, we can make life fairer for someone, somewhere, someday. Rise and shine in all corners of the earth, like the generous sunshine. There is no better way to make life meaningful for all. This is what life is all about.



## References

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